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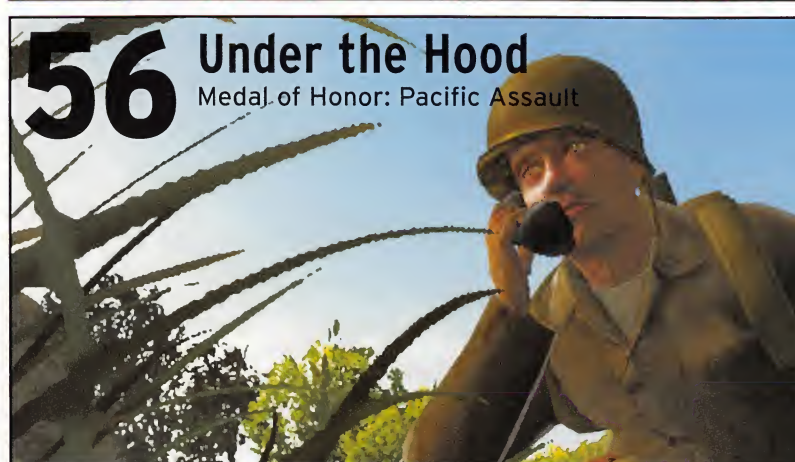
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Under the Hood

Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault



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Welcome to The Hub

How was 2003 for you? For me, returning to PCPP after a two year sabbatical, it's reassuring and yet somewhat saddening to see how little has changed. The big games are the same ones as when I left - only this time round they have a 2 or a 2004 or some awkward, nonsensical subtitle with a colon in the middle. While we're immensely proud to be able to bring you the world's first review of Unreal Tournament 2004, I can't help but think how much more exciting it'd be to bring you news of an Epic game that doesn't have Unreal in the title. Still, UT2K4 is a superb game in its own right and I urge you to check it out when it's released in early February.

Forum regulars will know we've been working on a new section devoted solely to online gaming - heck, you may have even suggested a name for it. So it's with great pleasure that I announce the debut of The Hub (thanks for the cool name, Coconut Monkey), the one stop shop for all your online, mod and multiplayer news. We kick off with a progress report on Star Wars Galaxies, seeing how it's faring some six months after its US launch. There's also a multiplayer review of War of the Ring, a guide to C&C Generals: Zero Hour online, a heap of mod reviews, plus the old favourite, Garage Games. Let us know what

you think and how we can improve The Hub over the coming months.

Another new section of sorts begins on page 30. Thanks largely to the post-Xmas drought, we figured it was about time we started getting stuck back into game previews. So we've brought back the old one page previews (plus a round-up page) to complement the larger feature previews. Enjoy!

I began by talking about 2003 because it's time once again for the annual PCPP GOTY awards. This is your chance to let us - and the games industry as a whole - know what were your favourite games of the year. The voting form is on page 45 and the winners will be announced in PCPP98, on sale March 10. Get your vote in now!

Now, back to fighting the future war on terror...

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The ones to blame:



David Wildgoose
EDITOR

"How much do the Omar rock?"

Playing: Invisible War



Prumpy
THE DWARF

"This shelf is really dull!"

Playing: Statues



Daniel Wilks
SENIOR WRITER

"Bearded woman am I?"

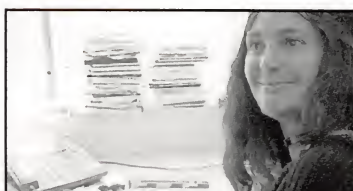
Playing: CTU Marine Sharpshooter.
Cos I hate myself



Bennett Ring
DEPUTY EDITOR

"I hate you mieces to pieces"

Playing: KOTOR



Ruth Barbato
ART DIRECTOR

"I can't cook but I can say, 'that's pukka mate'"

Playing: The MessHall



Timothy C. Best
SENIOR WRITER

"Are those interview questions back yet?"

Playing: Lords of Everquest



Amos Hong
DISC EDITOR

"World Idol is quite exciting"

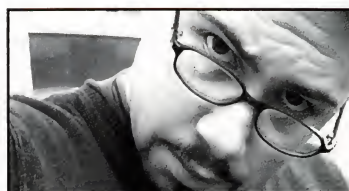
Playing: Angels Brought Me Here



Joel Graham
ADVERTISING MANAGER

"I'll get you, Bolo!"

Playing: Halo



Anthony Fordham
SENIOR WRITER

"Has Deus Ex 2 arrived?"

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WEREWOLF GOODNESS

After a long time I'm surprised to see the surge of werewolf movies and games, Dog Soldiers (of which my friend and I are making a private fan game), Underworld, Bloodmoon and there's bound to be a whole lot of other werewolfy goodness out there. Now after Dog Soldiers, I was interested in the actual folklore of werewolves. I found an article on a website, which happened to be the exact same one found on your "random website finder" and printed under the Bloodmoon review, which claimed to be the ritual that would turn you into a werewolf (and people want pr0n banned from the net?). That got me thinking, if indeed it was true, gamers could become werewolves and get revenge on the people who shun and make fun of us just because on a regular basis we post on a forum how we Ownz0r and everyone else is a wa11ha<k A1mB07 11ama f4git and also giving us the cunning, agility, speed, strength and teamwork that comes with being a werewolf. We would be super gamers. Also I apologise for any spelling errors or lack of any sentence structure, it's just so hard to type with these claws.

AtOMIC_SQUIRREL03

Spelling errors just keep us on our toes. Our feet are more deformed than a ballet dancer's now, though. You, sir, are mad!

BEEN THE BUGBEAR

Up until two months ago, I was the proud owner of over 800 computer magazines I had been collecting since the mid-eighties. Then the unfortunate happened one night when my wife and I went out for dinner. We returned to see our house turned upside down, and most of our stuff gone. Thankfully it was all insured and the insurance company we are going through was

prompt in replacing all of our things. All except for, you guessed it, my mags, cover discs, and some games. Now, I sit here wondering what has happened to all my mags, hoping at least that whoever has them now has the decency to look after them and treat them with the respect they do so deserve. Some of the mags dated back to 1981 (anyone remember Byte Magazine?), plus every single issue of PCPowerPlay from the first issue. But, the killer is the fact that, as mentioned above, not all games were replaceable. For the life of me, I am unable to find a copy of Freelancer anywhere. This has been the bugbear (though my wife isn't too worried about it as it means she gets more of me than my new computer), coz the hours I clocked up on that baby now have to be done all over again, if I can actually get it again. Living out here in the sticks makes it near on impossible to get it as no-one seems to stock it any more. So I am left to sit here, playing Solitaire on my kick butt computer, while some jerk plays Freelancer on his newly, if wrongly, attained two year old clunker. I hope it crashes on him.

Bryndal

Here, have a free Atari Heroes game... and a copy of Freelancer!

TINNIE BANDITS

First of all welcome to Ruth the new Art Director. I do hope you have read the excellent article by the Guerilla Gamer in PCPP#94 about games journalists and drink because, my dear, it doesn't have to be alcoholic. One of your work mates has been known to drink a whole carton of caffeine-high soft drink meant for the letter of the month's reader in one weekend. So don't leave your tinnie on the desk. I did forgive him and his mates for that, but I cannot forgive him for making male readers feel guilty for playing The Sims in his Sims 2 article. I am the owner of one of The Sims groups and moderator on others and I

happen to know just how many males enjoy the game. He is also wrong in thinking you can play it on any old obsolete machine. If you have all the expansions, and many downloaded objects, and want to throw a really decent rave party with all the Sim neighbours, you are going to need a P4 and decent video card, or they end up moving like zombies before you crash to desktop. I would also like to

the latest about new games from overseas. So, Merry Christmas, guys and gals!

Barbara Ibberson

Personally I'd be more embarrassed playing Morrowind than The Sims.

ENJOY SPY HUNTER

Coming up to the Christmas season you would think that big computer stores would start to advertise some new products, especially games. But as I found out couple of weekends ago they're not. I walked into Harvey's to buy me an early Christmas present - a copy Call of Duty - but found that it was not even in stock and had no advertising for the game at all. So I asked the attendant when they were expecting copies of it and she said that she had no idea and went to help another person. So there I was standing there like a fool when I noticed that Xbox had taken one of the PC games rows with its stupid Xbox Live. And more of its dodgy games. If all this wasn't enough I saw the same attendant that spoke to me only five minutes earlier suggest to a fifty-something father that his son would enjoy Spy Hunter. So I walked out of the shop vowing never to set foot in the shop again.

Tim Wilson

Do you have a humorous anecdote involving similar accounts of store attendant stupidity? If so, we'd love to hear it. They make us laugh.

SNIPPETS



Will it brake my pc or will it go faster?
Elliot Boyce

Humorous typo, that.

moderation and get the right diet and the right amount of exercise. If a healthy balance is not found heart related diseases will sky rocket in the soon future. All ready there is an epidemic of young children who spend to much time in front of the TV or PC or their console of choice and not enough in the fresh air (while it's still fresh) playing with their siblings/friends. All I can say is that the world will be a very different place when I arrive as a self-sustaining adult.

Peter Hootsen

Just pray that none of us will still be working on PCPP#200...

HALF-LIFE 2

Which video card would you recommend for best performance in Half-Life 2 and Doom 3, the ATI Radeon 9600XT or the Nvidia GeForce FX 5700 Ultra?

Kyle Priestly

Neither, quite frankly. Doom 3 is an Nvidia preferred game, while Half-Life 2 is on ATI's side. Either chipset will run both games, but we'll have to wait until the next generation cards are out before we're able to assess performance with any accuracy.

AT THE THRESHOLD

One can't help but notice the rapid escalation in game development costs that threaten to bankrupt the computer game development industry. It appears, at least from the outside, that we are not far off now from having a development industry that can only be supported by a few large players due to the overwhelming cost in computer game development. Actually, this would be both console and PC game development. However, I will limit my comments here to just the PC game industry. And there will also be some small examples that go against the trend, like Valve. But generally I think my comments ring true. When I say a few large players, I mean probably about 10 key players. Like Activision, EA, Eidos, LucasArts, Microsoft, Take Two, Ubisoft, etc. Anyone else will soon either be bankrupt, or purchased

FROM THE FORUMS

Subject: Games that mean something

The Video Game industry is a growing thing, Games are becoming a common form of media. What I want to see is games that have meaning, universal themes and symbolism just like in movies and books. The games could still be entertaining, just have meaning. Wouldn't it be good if you could study a game as a text for English? What are your opinions? I think that the theme of Revenge is almost portrayed in Max Payne 1 but it doesn't really show the advantage or disadvantage to it. If Max realised that revenge was wrong the game would have more merit, it's pretty easy to give a game meaning.

GrizzlyAdams, Cacodemon

That would be cool, games that come to mind right now are probably Final Fantasy X, Metal Gear Solid 2 (kinda) and Deus

Ex. I'd love to study a game for English. I expect that we shall see this in the future. Film has become a huge thing to study now, so games will probably be one day too.

Lankycheese, Templar

If you want meaning, look no further then Planescape: Torment. You'll find that RPGs and adventure games have more meaningful stories and events because it's primarily to tell a good story. Games like Quake are there to keep the blood rushing. And strategy....well, they're there for power hungry maniacs who like to order around hordes of people.

Jedi_Hart, Grunt

I think the whole aim of Max Payne was to not have a moral. The aim of Max Payne is to show that shit happens and things go on a downward spiral from there... much like in the real world. There is no real justification for things, nor

rationalization; things happen, they suck, and that's life. S'pose in that sense there's a lot to be learned from Max Payne.

Cyanidix, Skaarj

I've played many games that I believe have strong meaning to them with imagery and stories that are enough to write exams about. However the biggest problem is the stereotypical views of people, mainly school teachers. Most would think of computer games as a low form of entertainment and not realise many games have the potential to replace one of the books they are teaching.

DyNaMiX, Jedi

Planescape: Torment is the only game ever in the history of game development which has leant itself to serious analytical application. Don't even bother with other games.

Grishnahk, Great Claw

Anachronox touched on some issues. The planet of Democratus, for example, is one big satire of democratic systems. Games haven't become very serious about this yet, but I'm sure they will.

Random, Dungeon Keeper

To be studied at school, the game would have to be non-violent, PG rated, so that rules out most of the fun games. It has to be able to be studied within 10-20 hours class time. About 75% of these hours will be theory and class discussion about the game, 25% will be playing. The rest of the 'study' can be done at home but the school cannot assume that the children will have a computer capable of playing it at home unless the school provides the computers (HA!). Also to fit into school budgets, the game would have to cost less than \$20 per student. So how many games fill that criteria?

Voort, Skaarj



more life-like, have pushed all associated in the industry to breaking point. Look through any weekly news section of a computer game website, and you will find news of another company declaring itself bankrupt, or that is being purchased by one of the companies listed above. I guess this must be the way of things. So does anyone else see where this is heading? Do you not see the common link to be found with the Hollywood movie industry and the same cost escalations? What movies could be made for \$20 million 10 years ago now cost 5 times as much.

I think we are at the threshold. The development industry, over the next 3 to 5 years, will be teetering on the edge of the abyss. It would be good if games could just go back to what they used to be like in the middle nineties. Wishful thinking, I know. And maybe I make a comment such as this looking through rose coloured glasses. But dammit, I like games from that period! However these days, we see far fewer games than before. We see far more buggier games now which are not supported by publishers. Or the games are sold as nothing more than a beta

version and patched after release. Again, these are bad things, and reek of the underlying cancer I am talking about. When I purchase a car, it should come with all four doors attached. Not have one added later at an additional cost to myself. I would be interested to see whether anyone at PCPP would research this subject - a "state of the game developer's union", so to speak.

Liam Linstid

As publishing and distribution channels consolidate, we'll see a (very) gradual shift towards methods of electronic distribution. Half-Life 2 is set to be the first real test of this model, and I'm sure there are plenty of interested observers at those big ten publishers you name.

WET WEEKEND

I read the piece on Sims 2 in PCPP#94 and couldn't resist responding. I don't play The Sims, but I do enjoy the occasional RPG. Just as hardcore Sims players don't

want others wandering around their sandbox, I don't want others interfering with my RPG. This is where I have a problem with MMORPGs. I play when I can which means half a wet weekend or nothing for a couple of months. I expect to be able to play when I want to and have the game exactly as I left it. Presently I'm playing Arcanum and while I am thoroughly enjoying it, I envy my son's graphics on his Empire Earth and Halo. I started to get excited about the new Everquest games until it dawned on me that they are solely online. Personally I find that many games are not well marked as to whether they are RPG, RPG/MMORPG or solely MMORPG. There appears to be a trend to fewer RPGs generally (there's heaps of FPS and RTS to choose from at the moment) and more RPG titles are chasing the MMORPG bandwagon. What is the future of RPG? Should I go back to chess?

Steven Burrows

Whatever happened to the RPG? Damn good question and one that we'll examine in an upcoming feature...



Insight

BRING ON THE BANDWIDTH

ISP price drops on their way

Bennett Ring

Many Australians are quick to criticise our broadband infrastructure, as it's easy to compare the phat 1.5Mb/s pipes that American school kids can afford with the proceeds from their schoolyard crack syndicates with our own, much humbler offerings. What these Aussies don't take into account is that Australia is a vastly different kettle of fish than the US, with a much smaller population spread over a larger area, as well as the fact that we don't have the luxury of several different cable providers laying lines down each and every street. As a result broadband in Australia is still a relatively expensive proposition for all but the most hardcore of online gamers, but a recent announcement by Telstra could begin a new round of price drops in the land of LPBs.

If you're looking for information regarding Australia's broadband, there's only one place to go, Whirlpool (www.whirlpool.net.au), and these guys were the first to break news of Telstra's latest and greatest broadband plans.

Until now Telstra users have had to make do with a lousy 3GB cap, unless perhaps they'd offered to give up their first born child and/or paid an exorbitant amount of cash to Senor Ziggy. Alongside our hatred for a certain senator whose name rhymes with Ballstone, 3GB caps are not exactly loved, so the recent Telstra announcement that these caps are going the way of the Dodo (not the ISP, the extinct bird) has made many a file leecher rather happy. For around the same price as the

old 3GB capped accounts, users are now given more than three times that amount, at 10GB, and once this has been exceeded you'll still be able to download for free at the reduced rate of 64Kbit/s. No more getting \$9,642 bills when you 'accidentally' leave Kazaa uploading for a week or two.

As a result of this price drop, a wave of price drops from competing ISPs is now starting to wash over our sunburnt server farms. We already know of five ISPs (OptusNet, TPG, Internode, WestNet and DART Internet) who have announced significant price drops in their broadband plans, so now could be a good time to start researching a new broadband plan – chances are you'll save yourself a

nice amount if you bother to do so.

One thing that isn't so great about the new Telstra pricing is the fact that you'll be charged a new installation fee, even if you've already got a Bigpond broadband connection functioning perfectly at home. This will set you back \$189, which is quite simply ridiculous, and you'll also be locked into a long term contract (existing users must sign up for at least three months, while new users can kiss the next two years goodbye). However, these are small hassles compared to the benefits of having a juicy 10GB to chew through each month. Let's just hope that Telstra's network isn't bought to its knees by a sudden increase in downloads of the Paris Hilton video.



New Civ



Civ 4. That's really all we need to say here. Oh... okay, that's Civ 4 as in Civilization 4. Or, as is more likely, Civ IV. You know, Sid Meier, empire building, epic strategy, blah blah blah. Sid's at it again. It seems Civ 3 (sorry, III) wasn't enough, so now there's another. A fourth, to be precise. Can we stop now?

DIRECTX NEXT

Vertex and pixel shaders merge into a hideous hybrid

Anthony Fordham

Microsoft recently gave a demonstration of some of the features that are likely to be included in the tenth revision of DirectX, dubbed DirectX Next. While the API is not likely to be released until the Longhorn version of Windows makes its way to our groaning desktops, some of the features are of immediate interest.

While DirectXs 1 through 7 were all steady evolutions of the API, DirectX8 introduced the revolutionary programmable pixel and vertex shaders which changed the nature of 3D graphics and ushered in a new age of having to upgrade your video card every 18 months.

Vertex shading in DirectX 8 was more or less unlimited within the constraints of the actual video hardware, but pixel shading wasn't as nearly as programmable. It was possible to do a few vector operations on some inputs, with



only the frame buffer for output.

DirectX 9 improved this situation somewhat, with 3.0 versions of the vertex and pixel shaders giving developers much more flexibility but still favouring vertex over pixel operations. Finally, with version 4.0 (which will be included in DirectX Next) the syntax and feature set for all shaders is identical. Called the unified shader model, this will allow

developers to combine the different hardware units into a single, much more powerful pool. What does this mean for us? Better pixel and vertex shader performance across the whole range of DirectX Next cards, with even the cheap 'MX' versions still likely to be able to throw around clever graphical effects with all the élan of today's top shelf units. Tasty!

FPS = BAD

Lock Up Your Children

Timothy C. Best



San Francisco Assemblyman is introducing legislation that would put a ban on selling violent games to minors, and which squarely puts first-person shooters in the crosshairs.

It doesn't matter about the context or gore level, according to Assemblyman Leland Yee, the act of having to shoot and kill people to advance in a game is, in itself, damaging. He says that we shouldn't be encouraging kids "to maim, to torture and to kill".

Yee is a child psychologist and puts these games, such as Doom 3 and GTA 3, in the same categories as things like alcohol, pornography and cigarettes, all of which cause harm to kiddies and have been restricted.

The first phase of his legislation would see penalties for retailers who sell the good oil to the young-ens, while the second phase would be to separate the adult and the kid's games ... imagine slipping into an Adult Gameshop, or asking to check out the black-label id game.

This is the first time a bill like this has been put forward in California and it has gathered support from half a dozen law enforcement, women's rights and children's advocacy groups. That doesn't mean that it's smooth sailing for the bill, as there are several civil liberties and freedom of speech fanatics ready to pounce.

There's no doubt that specific games should be MA just like some

movies (and they are rated that way), but how can you target a gameplay style? Does a game become non-violent if you are only shooting robots? How about if you're aiming at rascally rabbits? First-person throwing water bombs or tomatoes count? Should we ban Chess because it encourages manipulation and tactical assaults on monarchs?

Interestingly enough, if it gets up enough steam the bill will land on Governor Schwarzenegger's desk, and you can be pretty sure that Arnie's the only Governor in history with an FPS doing the rounds ... you can see and hear him in the Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines game.

Heroes Quintology



UBISOFT

After securing the rights to the venerable Might & Magic franchise in the recent 3DO fire sale, French publisher Ubisoft has revealed early plans to continue both the cardinal RPG series as well as its turn-based strategy spin-off, Heroes of Might & Magic. Expect more news on the two titles at E3 this year.

Gaming Terrorism



It was bound to happen, of course. This month saw the announcement of two games depicting Dubya's pursuit of Evil Osama - Fugitive Hunter: War of Terror and America's Ten Most Wanted. Instead of being strategic tests of deliberate misinformation, we rather suspect they'll both be fairly mediocre tactical shooters in the Marine Sharpshooter vein.

Rise Up



Microsoft and Big Huge Games have unveiled the inevitable expansion pack for their well-received RTS, Rise of Nations. New bits include six more nations, 20 extra units, the obligatory historical campaigns. Of greater interest is the way each nation determines its own system of government, in turn affecting the course of its development.

Battlefield: Hoth



While work continues on Battlefield: Vietnam, LucasArts and EA have partnered to provide a Star Wars spin on the Battlefield series. Cleverly titled Star Wars: Battlefront (it's not just fields any more!), players will team up online to recreate some of the most famous conflicts from the Star Wars films. It'll be interesting to see what effect, if any, the game's simultaneous PS2 development has on the PC version. More news soon.

LIFE OWNERS

MMOG Hands Over Rights

Timothy C. Best



Second Life has always aimed to innovate, but one of its most trail-blazing moves might come with a bit of changed text in its Terms of Service agreement. Now players actually own their in-game creations.

This might not seem like much, but the consequences could be huge and far-reaching. In most games like Star Wars Galaxies, EverQuest or even NeverWinter Nights, the company that created the game owns anything that is made with or in the game, including your characters, their back story, appearance as well as anything you add to the game, like

any dungeons you might make for NeverWinter Nights.

The reasons for this are simple: you don't want ownership battles over your game, and you don't want to be caught out if a player beats them to the punch and creates something you were about to launch in an expansion or sequel.

Second Life, on the other hand, virtually provides a blank canvas and draws its life from what the community creates. It has provided amazingly detailed modding and 3D design crafting tools so players can create anything from ornate tables to race cars and amusement rides (complete with fees).

Since its release in June 2003, more than 200,000 new objects have been created by players and more than 100,000 user-to-user transactions take place each month.

Now creative players will be rewarded with more than just in-game cash – now they will also own their creations. Now, if you make a table in Second Life, you have copyright on that design, just as if you made it at home – which is an amazing plus, especially if you happen to be a furniture designer. Hopefully this move will encourage creative types not to hold back ... which has to be a great boon to any online world, right?



GAMES PASS YEAR 8

Markers invent dumb new word

Anthony Fordham

The 8th annual report card was issued by MediaFamily in December in order to inform parents, wowers and the casually intrigued how bad video games are for everyone, especially the kids.

In the process, the organisation also coined a new term – killographic – to mean the graphic depiction of violence, drawing parallels with pornographic. However, the organisation fails to mention why this word is needed now, when it wasn't necessary back in 1974 on the release of The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, in which a sweet young teen is hung on a meathook.

MediaFamily also raises concerns about the increasing

amount of "screen time" and the concordant spread of obesity, especially in the US. While surveys indicate that American children are only consuming 1% more calories than in 1990, physical activity is down 13% in the same period and screen time has increased 33%.

Fortunately for the health-conscious gamer, the same survey shows TV is still largely to blame, with kids spending 25 hours a week in front of the idiot box and only 9 hours gaming. As soon as the world realises Everybody Loves Raymond isn't funny, obesity rates should fall.

Further research has shown that 87% of students play games regularly, with a bias toward boys – 96%

versus 78% for girls. However, this is a lower margin than in previous years. The research also showed that 50% of students believe their parents don't understand the rating systems, while 77% of boys who own M-rated games bought them without their parents' knowledge.

While the report card gives a bunch of naff ranks to various aspects of the games industry, the list of games to avoid is more interesting. While Manhunt, Road Kill, and DOA Beach Volleyball seem obvious, the teen-rated Wii: Frozen Throne is puzzling. You'll be on safer ground however if you stick to SimCity 4, MS Flight Sim 2004 or Rayman 3. Yawn.

WIN!

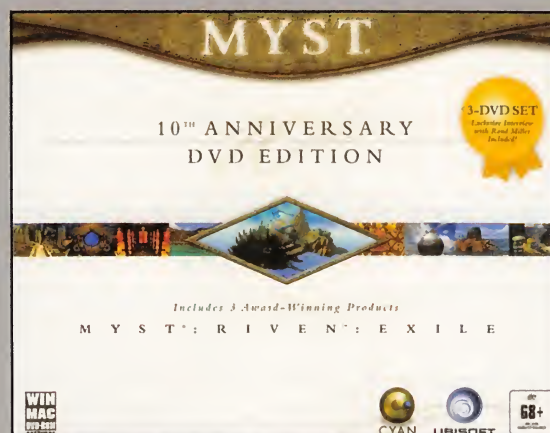


Myst Comp
PC PowerPlay
78 Renwick St
Redfern 2016

URU: AGES BEYOND MYST

Thanks to Ubisoft, we've got five Myst prize packs to give away. Each pack contains the 10th Anniversary Edition of Myst (including Myst, Riven and Myst III: Exile) and the Collector's Edition of the new one, URU: Ages Beyond Myst. To win, simply answer this question on the back of an envelope:

Q. Name the two brothers who founded Cyan, the developer of Myst?



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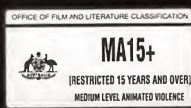
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PlayStation²



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Sonic Boom



The speedy blue hedgehog may have lost his cachet in recent years, but that doesn't seem to have deterred Sega from reviving his career on PC. Sonic Adventure DX is an allegedly enhanced version of the Dreamcast original - yep, Dreamcast - first released in 1999. Quite how anyone expects a nearly half-decade old console game to be a success on PC is more than baffling. But - hey! - good luck guys.

Go West



IL-2 Sturmovik has spawned yet another add-on, this time switching the focus to Western Europe. Titled Battle over Europe, the upcoming expansion depicts the conflict between the USAAF and Luftwaffe during 1944 and 1945 through no fewer than twelve offline campaigns and a dynamic online mode. Once Bennett's stopped trying to get LO:MAC to run properly, he'll play this.

WIN!



War of the Ring Comp
PC PowerPlay
78 Renwick St
Redfern 2016

R.I.P. MICROPROSE

Strategy Giant Fades Away

Timothy C. Best

MicroProse hasn't gone out with a bang; it just dried up with its work. The Studio had just completed D&D Heroes and its current owners Atari just couldn't see any projects on the horizon for the small studio of 35 and hence disbanded it, letting the team go just in time for Christmas.

In its day MicroProse developed and published over 90 titles including games that helped define the strategy genre like Sid Meier's Civilization I and II, Railroad Tycoon and Pirates!. Then we had the Gunship series, X-Com, Master of Magic, Master of Orion I and II, Grand Prix Manager and Falcon 4.0.

MicroProse started with flight

sims (and Sid Meier games) and then in 1993 it ran into money when the US branch tried an arcade machine and that's when Spectrum Holobyte swooped. The new boss almost cancelled X-Com twice and the whole deal alienated many of the company's core designers.

In 1996 Spectrum sold MicroProse to toy giant Hasbro, which, only a year later, closed two of its main studios because they weren't proving profitable enough. In 1998 it cut another studio, the team behind Master of Orion. This, with the voluntary departures of many staff, left a big design hole.

Under Hasbro MicroProse worked on games like Magic the

Gathering, some Star Trek titles (including a MoO2 knock-off), a Gunship update as well as the much-delayed Falcon 4.0.

None of these were as big as the toy giant had hoped and in 2001 it dissolved the MicroProse brand, tossed it in with Atari and sold it off to Infogrames. There the MicroProse stayers were given Grand Prix 4, and, finally, D&D Heroes before the company dried up and blew away.

Luckily for us, the spirit of early MicroProse lives on in the employees who fled and formed their own companies like Take-2 Interactive (1993), I-Magic (1995), and Firaxis (1996).



OPEN SOURCE HARDWARE

When Linux geeks and electronics geeks make beautiful love

Anthony Fordham

While the concept of open source software has been widely publicised, few realise that the underlying core hardware still runs on proprietary designs.

Opencores.org explains why this is a bad thing. "There are now many millions of gates in a single application-specific integrated circuit (ASIC). Design times get longer and longer. This can result in excessive time-to-market and excessive cost. Current proprietary cores are expensive, rarely properly documented and suffer from incompatible design and test tools, while the purchaser does not have access to the source design, making

integration much more difficult."

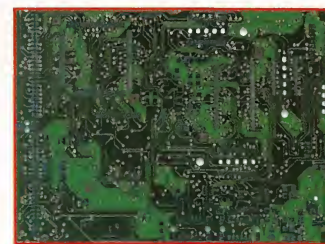
Opencores has therefore created a set of guidelines for open source core designs. They expect the larger user base for each GPL core will result in better support, better documentation and better examples. Also, they expect cores to become more standards-compliant than current proprietary designs, which means better hardware for all.

Opencores is still struggling with what kind of license to use since there are varied meanings of "open source". While designing a core is not necessarily more expensive than developing software, building the hardware for

real-world testing can cost thousands of dollars in prototyping.

Fortunately, the evolving nature of the opencore standard hasn't stopped Flextronics Semiconductor from building a System-On-Chip board using the OpenRISC 1200 standard developed by the organisation. It's a 32-bit general purpose microcontroller running at 160MHz. It has a PCI 2.2 interface, an Ethernet port, a memory controller capable of handling flash, SDRAM, SRAM or DPRAM and a console interface for debugging.

What does it do? It's not about the do. It's about the try. Try or try not, there is no do.



WAR OF THE RING

Thanks to Vivendi Universal Games, we've got five copies of the Lord of the Rings strategy fest that is War of the Ring. They're limited edition boxes, too! Woohoo! To enter, simply answer this question on the back of an envelope:

Q. War of the Ring developer Liquid Entertainment previously designed which acclaimed real-time strategy game?



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Colin's Back



Another year, another rally sim with Colin McRae on the box. Surely there must be someone else driving cars through dirt really fast? This fourth instalment in the series is already out on other platforms and is by all reports superior to the disappointing third version, but we lucky PC gamers get a neat eight-player LAN and online experience for our patience.

Shouldering Arms



In yet more exciting console port news, Namco has revealed plans to translate its entertaining action shooter, *kill.switch*, to PC later this year. We've seen it on PS2 while peering over the shoulder of a Sony-inclined colleague and can report that its over-the-top Rambo-esque stylings wouldn't look too out of place on PC. We particular like being able to shoot blind over your shoulder.

KAZAA SHUTS DOWN KAZAA LITE

And the irony is apparent to all

Anthony Fordham

In a move that has peer-to-peer file sharers crying "hypocrites!" Sharman Networks, creators of the hugely popular Napster-substitute Kazaa have yanked Kazaa Lite K++ from the Net by threatening legal action against any site that hosts it.

Sharman's justification is that Kazaa Lite infringes their copyright - kinda ironic since the primary function of Kazaa is to distribute pirated files between users.

While Sharman is up in arms because Kazaa Lite K++ was developed by a bunch of enthusiasts and thus represents an attack on Sharman's intellectual

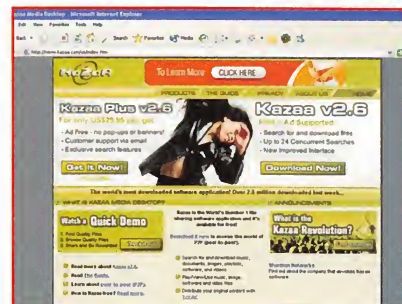
property, the real problem with Kazaa Lite K++ is that it is basically a version of Kazaa without all the adware and spyware the application normally includes. While Kazaa is free, users must submit to frequent pop-up ads care of the GAIN Network, while Cydoor spyware collects interesting information about your PC usage and sells it to Sharman's sponsors. You can get an ad-free version of Kazaa for US\$29.95, but understandably most users feel a bit off using registered software to steal music.

Of course, completely erasing an application off the whole Internet is

practically impossible, so Sharman's answer has been to upgrade the Kazaa supernodes (computers that hold lists of popular files and users to speed up the file sharing process). Kazaa Lite K++ is based on Kazaa 2.5, so any attempt to access one of the new supernodes will result in a failed connection.

So Kazaa Lite K++ will choke in 0.05kps hell, and thanks to the decision to disable its own supernode functionality, current users will not be able to form their own 'underground' P2P network.

Meanwhile, the RIAA is killing itself laughing. Or so we hear.



HARDCORE HITS

Gaming Addiction and You

Timothy C. Best

It would seem that recent studies indicate that games journalists have blown it time and time again by bringing out the word addictive in their reviews. Apparently, they're not. Well, not more so than lots of things that are wildly popular.

At the Digital Games Researcher Conference in Utrecht, scientists from various disciplines heard that while games can stimulate similar areas of the brain to drugs and alcohol, there is chemical counter-agent as there is for other substances we consider chemically addictive.

The studies presented at the Conference found that many heavy game players even described themselves as addicted and indicated that their work and family life had suffered for it, but the main thrust of the researched seemed to point to the fact that this addiction just came from the amount of time invested. How many people have died from over-excesses in sport, work, study or "for their art"?

Researchers also heard that the idea of these addicted gamers were weird loners was generally exceedingly far from the truth and many dedicated gamers actually were hooked on the most social

aspects of the game, not the games themselves.

A social psychology professor and media analyst at Simon Fraser University, Stephen Kline, did add that children as young as 10 were starting to get involved in these games and that families need to be aware of this because they are very different to comic books. Games are a social thing where nobody cares what you look like or where you're from, and you get to start afresh whenever you log in. That can be pretty tempting.

From PCPP we send out a big "well, d'uh" to the academics.



WIN!



X2

THE THREAT

Thanks to QV Software, we've got five copies of X2: The Threat, the hardcore space sim lover's game of choice, to give away. If Freelancer was too shallow, you'll dig X2. To enter, simply answer the following question on the back of an envelope:

Q. What is the biggest threat in space?

X2 Comp
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Back to 'Nam



Fresh from its success with Conflict Desert Storm 2, UK publisher SCI has surprised no one with word that not one but two further Conflict sequels are in the works. The first is Conflict: Vietnam, presumably a squad-based tactical shooter set in the jungle instead of the desert. The other is the mysteriously named Conflict 4, presumably a squad-based tactical shooter set in an as-yet-undecided theatre of war instead of a desert.

We have lift off!



Once thought dead, Imperium Galactica 3 is back on schedule for a second attempt to blast into orbit. After being dropped by previous publisher CDV, the hardcore space strategy title has been picked up by Dutch publisher HD Interactive, retitled Nexus and penciled in for a late 2004 release. No word on an Australian distributor at this stage.

DRAGON RISING

China Goes Online Gaming

Timothy C. Best



When Korea emerged as a major online-gaming force with games like the mega-hit Lineage (which kicks EverQuest's behind in subscribers), it took most of us Western gamers by surprise.

Well, it looks like another eastern tiger is about to awake. Recent figures have revealed that China now has 40 million people playing games online, with online income expected to hit \$US240 million for 2003. That's an explosion, up 187 percent from 2002 and predictions place annual growth at around 50% for the next several years.

This is leading to a scramble to make some home-grown games.

Titles like EverQuest aren't doing much, and Korean games cost between \$1 and \$2US million dollars upfront, plus 30% of the profits to import. When the companies there charge 3 cents an hour, you can imagine what a drain it can be.

If you include Taiwan and Hong Kong as being a part of China (as the government like to do no matter what Taiwan thinks), there are at least 18 MMOG titles being developed in-country.

One of the reasons that China is exploding on the online front is that subscriptions neatly side step chronic piracy issues that have made the Chinese software market

unprofitable.

One company, NetEase, has managed to hook 1.2 million subscribers for its first domestic game, and while it can't compete with the imports technologically, it can cream them in support.

Although, these early games probably won't interest us much, we should pay attention to what's going on. Beyond all of the thousands of years of cultural development and refinement, just think of all the HK action flicks we enjoy now. With years of the US and US-style games dominating the PC market maybe it's time things got shaken up a little and huge Asian markets might just do that.

TV SPIKES AWARDS

New Channel, New Game Awards

Timothy C. Best



Spike TV, the "network for men", just held its first annual Video Game Awards ceremony. The fledgling network went all out using the massive MGM Grand Arena and having David Spade host the whole she-bang.

To counteract Spade there were performances by Kelis, DMX, P.O.D. and Blink 182's Bubba Sparxx and Travis. If he still out-geeked them then there were also appearances by Pamela Anderson (who looks like a video game character), Shaquille O'Neal, Lil' Kim, Ray Liotta, Jamie Pressly, Orlando Jones, Penn & Teller, Tony Hawk, DOA Volleyball Girls and WWE wrestlers Chris Jericho, Rey Mysterio, Trish and Victoria. And there were also

100 Stormtroopers in official get-up.

When it came to the awards, they did away with boring stuff like acceptance speeches and focused on flashy machinima intros, gameplay footage and celebrities shooting their mouths off.

A combination of votes from the Spike TV website, the network's editorial board and a couple of random industry-types decided the honours.

The manly Madden NFL 2004, took out the top prize of game of the year while the bikini clad girls of Dead or Alive Beach Volley Ball proved too jiggly to ignore and took out Best Animation.

Best Performance by a Human in a game went to Ray Liotta doing his

patented mob guy-routine for Rockstar's Grand Theft Auto 3: Vice City. He beat out David Duchovny, Christopher Walken, Jada Pinket-Smith, Giovanni Ribisi, a porn actress and some rappers for the award.

Enter the Matrix was the Best Game Based on a Movie, Soul Calibur II proved Most Addictive, Star Wars Knights of the Old Republic wrapped up Best Fantasy, Final Fantasy XI took out Best Online, True Crime was the top of the action heap, Call of Duty was Best First-Person Action Game, and Xbox-escapee Halo was dubbed Best PC Game. Some of the awards almost make you wonder why they had a comedian as the host...

THE BEST GAME YOU'VE NEVER PLAYED

#2 JAGGED ALLIANCE 2

Jagged Alliance 2 is one of the few games that successfully mixes real-time with turn-based strategy, while integrating a large amount of role playing. It involved the player commanding a small group of mercenaries, each of whom was unique and needed to be paid. The funding to keep these mercs came from mines, which had to be fought for. This is where JA2 really shines, with a turn-based combat system that, when mastered, is extremely more user

friendly than real-time combat.

The only reason why this game never sold large amounts and remained hidden was because, while Talon Soft made the game brilliant, the company in charge of marketing went bust well before the game was finished. However, that had no effect on the game, being in my opinion, one of the best games of the past few years.

Andrew Cooper



LASTEXILE

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HOTWARE

All the bits that we cram in at the last moment with Anthony Fordham



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Price: \$7499 **Distributor:** LG **Contact:** www.lge.com.au

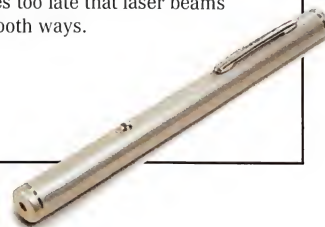
Yark! I hear you cry. Rear-projection TVs suck! And true, traditionally the rear-projection unit looked less like a big TV and more like a crappy projector throwing an image onto a bedsheet. No more! Thanks to the miracle of digital light processing (wherein thousands of tiny mirrors fool around with light to create an image), LG's latest rear-projection TV gives plasma models a serious run for their money. And, while expensive, it's still much cheaper than a plasma unit of similar size. But most important of all, you can use this TV with your various gaming consoles or even your PC and not worry about that scourge of plasma - burn in. That's right, while playing The Sims for sixteen hours a day on your plasma screen will leave a permanent imprint of Will Wright's genre-busting interface on your telly, this won't happen with a rear-projection TV. Plus it has all those doohickies like picture-in-picture and teletext so your apartment can maintain a trendy late 80s feel. Oh the technology!

GREEN LASER POINTER

Price: \$165 **Distributor:** Think Geek **Contact:** www.thinkgeek.com

The only problem with those irritating laser pens that idiots take to movie premieres is that they're not irritating ENOUGH. So the boffins at laser pointer headquarters came up with this device. It's a green laser, and everyone in science land knows green is much more powerful than red - after all, what colour was Luke Skywalker's lightsaber in Return of the Jedi, huh? I could try and impress you by throwing around terms like "532nm wavelength versus 650nm" or "constant wave output" but all you really need to know

is that this laser is 50 times brighter than a red one and it's green! Green! Plus, in a variety of darkened conditions you can actually see the beam as well as the dot, so why not make a present of one to your least favourite movie-ruiner and then watch him get mobbed by the crowd as he realises too late that laser beams point both ways.



PREMIER HEALTH PHP2027 MASSAGE CHAIR

Price: \$4750 **Distributor:** Elite Massage Chairs **Contact:** www.elitemassagechairs.com

Sure, you may not be jealous of Homer Simpson because of his baldness, his fatness or his weird-looking wife, but admit it - you were jealous of the time he got that massage chair. Is there nothing that more fully represents humanity's domination of the elements than the massage chair? Huge and black, the PHP2027 boasts of having the world's ONLY 3D masseuse depth technology. What does that mean? Not sure, but it involves 31 inches of stroke depth. Phwoar. Basically, you load yourself into this thing and feel your troubles rattle away... along with your fillings. Another big

selling point of this chair is that the back is made of the same coloured material as the rest of the chair! Apparently, this is revolutionary when it comes to massage chairs. And you can change the kneading direction! Wow baby! Couple this with the "most advance (sic) heated back pad" and you're instantly in massage heaven. Who needs a life partner when you have this chair?



SUPER GIANT ROBOT

Price: \$635 **Distributor:** Neat Stuff **Contact:** www.neatstuff.net



Sometimes, to be cool you gotta go low-tech. See, when our parents - and for some of us, grandparents - were boys, toys were better. Plastic was a rare luxury and the manufacturing material of choice was good ol' tin. It's what made the British Isles great. This particular tin robot is a staggering 16 inches tall. That's longer even than... never mind. It takes three C-cell batteries and sort of waddles around making a squawking noise, and then in classic fashion its chest springs open and it shoots you with light guns! Not that you'll ever see it do this of course - this thing is a collector's item and should never be removed from its packaging. Bring a little 50s flavour to your kitsch retro studio apartment. It'll look great next to that Mac G4 Cube that you picked up for \$200 at the local op-shop. PS: Six hundred bucks?? Man, you'd have to be dedicated to collecting crappy toys your own dad's mum paid one pound sixpence for back in 1953.

STEEL GAMING GLOVE

Price: \$25 **Distributor:** Steelpad **Contact:** www.steelpad.com

Are you one of those creepy doughbeasts who spends their entire time cloistered in their room playing endless CS ladder matches and downloading every Simpsons episode ever over your phat cable connection? If so, you no doubt suffer from 'sweaty palm syndrome' and have experienced the dismay and frustration caused by losing a critical competition game because your hand slipped off the mouse at a key moment. Dismiss these problems in a heartbeat with the Steel Gaming Glove! It's not actually

made of steel, it's made of like, stretchy fabric so one size fits all. It fixes traction. It firms up your grip, even if you're sweaty. And, in the words of the press release "if you have a mousepad which is too cold in your own opinion the glove solves this problem too." At last, a proper solution for cold mousepads. And all this time I was sticking mine down my pants.



FLYFAIRY RC HELICOPTER

Price: \$69 **Distributor:** PC Range **Contact:** www.pcrange.biz

Of all the RC things in this world - buggies, boats, tanks, monster trucks and genetically modified rats - the coolest is undoubtedly the helicopter. Not only is an RC chopper far more expensive than even turbofan-powered RC planes, it can kill you with its razor sharp, rapidly spinning rotors. Most of us, sadly, will never have the \$8000 lying around to get a 'proper' RC chopper (and if we do we'll be spending it on LG's new TV). Fortunately, PC Range is now stocking this neat little distraction! The doubtfully named FlyFairy is a simple plastic device that charges on its own helipad and then flings itself 30m into the air. The packaging boasts of being able to fly the thing in ANY DIRECTION thanks to the left/right knob. I know how it feels. Sure,

there are naff plastic rotor guards on it so you can't scalp your irritating baby cousin at 20kph but I'm sure you can cut those off (note from legal team - don't cut them off). At \$70 it should keep the kids quiet at least so you can enjoy some quality time in your massage chair.



GAMETRAC

Price: TBA **Distributor:** Tiger Telematics **Contact:** www.gametrac.com

Another month, another 3D Studio Max mockup image of a prototype gaming console. See, this is why Sony Computer Entertainment refuses to release any images of the PSP - it doesn't want to be lumped in with this lot of whackos. Still, let's for the moment assume that the Gametrac will in fact be built and sold. It has an impressive set of features - Bluetooth, MMC slot, MP3 playback, mpeg4 video playback, 2.8 inch screen and funky plastic taco

stylings. It intends to run Windows CE .NET edition, presumably to prepare us all for the inevitable .NET domination of the planet. It also has a built in camera so you can photograph your friends and then MMS the results to your other friends. Because, let's face it, anyone who owns one of these is going to have LOTS of friends. Games? You want to know about the games? Mate, we're only giving evens at this stage that the Gametrac will ever get past prototyping.



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SENNHEISER

OUT TO PLAY Timothy C. Best



Children of a Lesser Gadget

Now I understand that there are a lot of reasons why PCs have evolved the way they have.

I understand that there are a lot of applications that drive computing power forward, like science, the military and the increasing complexity of administering SMS votes for Australian Idol programs, not to mention the requirements of movies and the arts.

What I don't understand is that while our graphics chips and CPU grunt may be up to the instant, our I/O equipment has pretty much stood in the corner picking its nose for the past decade.

You know what? I want all of those gadgets that look so cool in movies like *Minority Report* and *Final Fantasy: Spirits Within*. I want the Nintendo-style control gloves, I want 3D screens with floating holograms, I want voice recognition and I want touch sensors. Now, for a geek I fail miserably in tech for tech's sake, but I want more out of games and I'm starting to cast accusatory glances at the hardware that decorates the area around my actual box.

Real Dimensions

We've had 3D games for years now, but, really they've skimmed on the third D: depth. Perspective helps with the 3D illusion, but without our left and right eye seeing slightly different things and making spatial calculations from that, an illusion is all it is.

When Sharp released its laptop (the Actius RD3D) last month it made a bold step forward for the 3rd dimension. It handles stereoscopic 3D without painful goggles or 50s cellophane glasses and it can switch between 2D and Jetsons mode.

What's really interesting is the announcement that Sharp has already identified more than 900 games that are ready to leap out of the screen.

Apparently, NVIDIA graphics chips have been able to render stereoscopic images for the left and right eye for years, meaning that you don't even have to worry about 3D specific titles to get the effect.

With stereoscopic screens like these new gameplay elements become much more practical and recycled game elements start making sense again.

Depth Perception

Imagine something like *Half-Life 2* with this depth. You run up and yank a grill off of the wall using your mini-tractor beam. There's only so much you can do with this make-shift ball and chain just using

perspective but if you add depth perception and hence a much more refined sense of distance your gameplay possibilities get much more subtle. Your brain has been programmed to deal with the vagaries of stereoscopic depth courtesy of thousands of years of hunting and evolution, so we might as well use it.

You can imagine how much easier depth games like jumping puzzles will become and how much more quickly we should be able to process spatial information from complicated 3D levels.

Beyond this, companies are even working on holo-projector devices. One, IO2 Technology, bounces light off air to create floating images while Actuality System's rotating projector aims to create a 3D image in a transparent dome. Beyond just adding depth to environments, going down this path allows us to look at games more like an object, story or scenario to be manipulated. It's right there, in front of us ready to be played with like a giant, adaptive toy.

Vital Input

The input side hasn't taken to the ins and outs of 3D any better than your flat-screen. The mouse and keyboard still dominates PC gaming, which is cool since having your arm rest on a nice, 2D, table means that it doesn't get sore, and this combo rocks for games where you only target in 3D or grab troops with rectangles.

It's not so great, however, for a game like Homeworld with real movement in several dimensions where you have to grab units flying around on different attack vectors from above and below.

When it comes to grabbing and manipulating things in 3D we have very little experience beyond using our hands. Drawing a cube with a mouse takes some doing, while zooming in or out and grabbing a similar cube shape with our hand is as familiar and easy as reaching out and touching.

There are some basic gloves on the market now and there are companies working on virtual keyboards with promising technology. Some models include strap-like gloves which register the key strokes that your hand would make on a keyboard and interpret them. If you added a grabbing motion to the software then you're almost home. You could even freely switch between grabbing and typing.

Until we have some simple way of manipulating things in 3D then no matter



you could have a character walk into the wind and feel the mouse tug you side ways

how great the graphics get, we will still be limited to gameplay that can't fly beyond the confines of a horizontal table top.

New Senses

Even sticking to the dimensions we're used to, there are so many things we could do to spice up the link we have with our games.

We're used to giving verbal orders, so where's the voice interface? I'm not talking total Star Trek action but what using it as another layer of control? Xbox Live is giving it a go, but I'm yet to see matching moves on the PC and I know I've seen plenty of complicated games drowning under the weight of their interfaces. Surely some commands like "follow", "stay" or "hey, there" could help lighten the load.

How about adding touch into games? Modern consoles come standard with rumble-pack enhanced controllers. In console versions of *Splinter Cell* you use the sensation of touch to pick locks. Admittedly, the sensation is limited to rumbling, but still it gives you whole new ways to present your world to players.

Now think about the PC world. Beyond racing titles, how many games use force feedback? Maybe five or ten

percent? Whatever the exact figure is, it's pretty lame; and I'm pretty sure touch is one of the more popular senses.

Imagine if you had a force feedback mouse with a big and heavy enough, motorised, ball to give a decent pull. You could have a character walk out into the wind and feel the mouse tug you side ways. Being slammed left and right by powerful blows could be a touch thing and drunk characters could have their world lurch dangerously. Not only would this allow the immersive aspects it adds to gameplay by making new challenges like these possible. That's beyond the simple lock picking-type, feeling along walls for secret buttons, or having gadgets click together by feel puzzles which all become possible with just a touch of force feedback.

That's Deep, Man

I know that new mass-market devices require careful design, a killer game and a backer big and smart enough to create a bandwagon worth getting on, but it's almost got to be time, right?

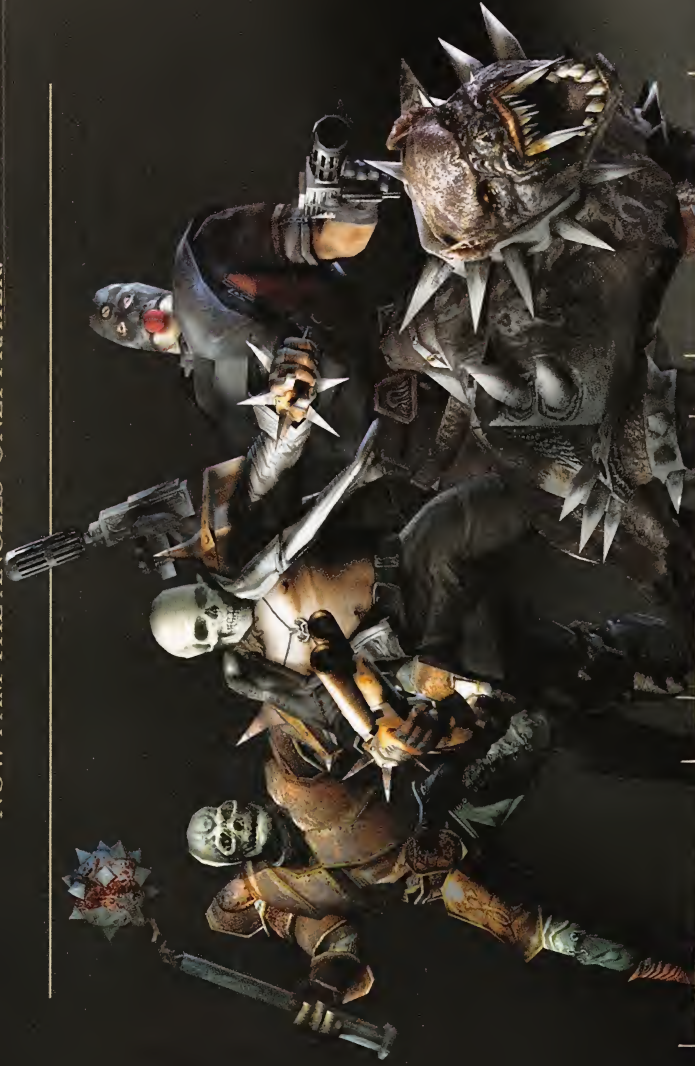
When we finally get around to digging into the third dimension, we'll find out what having a deep game really means.

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THE GUERRILLA GAMER

Rage Against the Machine

Isn't it funny, the relationship gamers have with their games? I visit my PCPP-reviewer friends regularly, (usually on the pretext of borrowing money) to watch them play the latest whatever with its amazing new AI routines, and I smirk to myself as they howl and scream at the machine as it variously shoots them, beats them or rips them off.

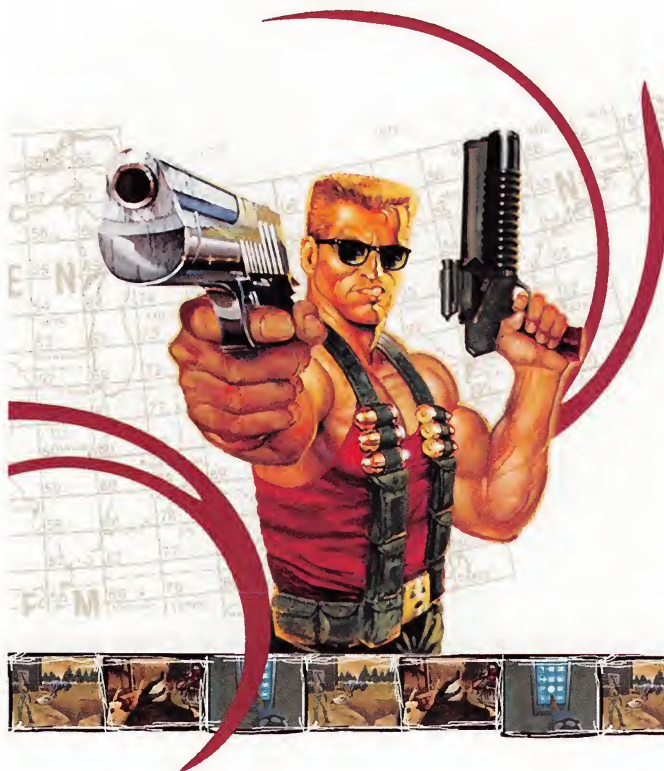
What I'm talking about is the curious human inability to say, "oh well, the game's just following its programming routines, it doesn't actually KNOW that it's beating me." I'm talking about the kinds of names people call the AI in the games they are playing as that AI manages to get the best of them over and over again.

For me, this month, the source of my ire was Railroad Tycoon 3. After the reviewer finished with it, I gained custody of the slightly sweaty discs and loaded them up on my own machine. Sure, the game is completely addictive in almost every way but man, after a few hours, did I ever HATE that Board of Directors. What was it with them? I could have ten million dollars in the bank, rail connecting every city on the map, massive profits, lower overheads and still they would be "annoyed with my performance" and "cut my salary by \$6,000." How the hell am I not supposed to take that kind of thing personally? Don't they realise I have a HABIT to feed? Apparently, you see, companies are supposed to grow, and unless mine grew from year to year the Board would get increasingly fed up and eventually fling me out on my arse. Nice realism, you might say.

But what about this image? Me standing over my PC at 1:00am brandishing a baseball bat screaming: "A YEAR? I give you thirty million in the bank and a regional monopoly and you give me a YEAR to turn my performance around or I'm FIRED? I'll give YOU fired!" Fortunately, the yelling woke my parents and they were able to disarm me before I ruined the PC. Again.

AI anger

Or how about the hate and fury you feel toward the AI drivers of any half-decent racing game? You know when - when they take a corner too tight



and plough you into the barrier wall at 200kph. On the track that you'd crashed out on six consecutive times already and had finally managed to keep it on the road for three of four laps until this idiot wiped you out. Have you ever felt anger like that? A great upwelling of stupid, useless utterly justifiable fury?

"It's cheating!" you'll scream. If only our games were that sophisticated. You see, THAT would be something to get excited about. A game that deliberately, and artfully, winds you up until you're a quivering hair-trigger of crock-flinging rage ready to unleash yourself on your loved ones and your personal property.

Vivendi tried it last year with Total Immersion Racing, in which AI drivers would get pissed off when you overtook, but I think they should have taken the whole thing further. I think they should have had AI racers that didn't care about winning, but instead drove really slowly directly in front of the player's car. Or fans that threw beer cans on the tracks near the pits. Maybe even cattle.

I'd like to see RTS games where the AI uses maphacks and cheats like a bastard. Extra hit points for buildings, shorter build times, the whole bit. But it can't cheat openly, it has to be artful. The AI has

to want to not get CAUGHT cheating. It's got to be sneaky about the whole thing so that by the time the player finally realises what's going on, part of their screaming fit of rage is directed at THEMSELVES for being so gullible.

I'd like to see AI that quits out of the game just seconds before you achieve your massive victory and then pleads "server problems" and offers a rematch but with "no rushing". And then rushes three minutes into play.

Or how about an FPS where you have to fight three really difficult boss monsters in succession with no save points, and then just before you finally kill the final boss the game throws up a fake blue-screen-of-death and makes a snickering sound as the player kicks in their monitor. Maybe bot AI that, when it's getting beaten, suddenly stops playing properly and just runs around in circles firing at the floor, or bunny hops over and over again and calls you lame.

We could even have a flight sim that randomly switches Friend-or-Foe identifiers and mixes up your in-flight maps so you end up bombing your own convoys (actually, I think the USAF already has something like this). But afterwards, it has to laugh and insult you.

Vanishing quests

When it comes to MMORPGs, well mostly they have this untapped aspect of gaming covered, what with the way that in EverQuest, items you spent thousands of hours questing for will suddenly be rendered useless by the application of a server patch you didn't even know was being applied. Or how you can choose a certain class and spend hundreds of hours and months of subscription fees only to discover that this class you've chosen isn't actually any good and can't level up past 50.

This kind of thing has to make it into singleplayer RPGs too, because these games are typically much too relaxing and free of frustration. We need NPCs that tell players about quests that don't exist and who won't help them until they get objects that aren't included in the game. We need NPC party members that refuse to participate in the quest and stop roleplaying and complain about wanting to go out for cheeseburgers. And other NPCs who overdo the whole roleplaying thing, speak in a silly voice, and always want to kill everything because they're "chaotic evil". And then maybe the game as DM could get bored and pissed off and drop three or four Gold Dragons on Level 1 party members, only promising to take them away if "everyone shuts up and plays properly."

Finally, I think there should be player matching software included with all multiplayer games that continually makes fun of the fact that you can't find anyone online to play with, that none of your friends seem to like the same games as you do, and that when you DO finally get online and get in a game, you always get canned. That'd be great. Well, I reckon it would, anyway.

The Guerilla Gamer is a fairly well-travelled PC gaming journalist who likes to watch other people play games that he's not good at. And then he likes to critique their performance. He thinks the key to comedy is pain and is not above inflicting it on the people he works with. It should now be obvious that his views rarely coincide with PCPP's.



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TECH TALK: Stuart Calvin

A trip to the local



Underneath gaming goodness lurks a thousand issues of PCPowerPlay. I read every letter sent to me and I try to answer some of the more grave issues. Take a clicking drive for example: everyone who writes in about a clicking drive (they're not supposed to click, by the way) never replies to me. I give them about two hours before drive failure sets in and we can't correspond any further, clicking SCSI units are especially dire. Usually my email to a clicker runs along the lines of "backup that drive NOW!". Some people correspond until the problem is solved. Predominantly I get no reply which means they're on their exultant way again. For us, salvation is one email or one issue away. For others, some fairly serious evil is trapped just waiting to bust out and turn their screen to blue faster than a head shot. Failed hardware, software conflicts and what I subtly refer to as 'accidental user intervention' cover just about every PC malady. If your machine won't boot then there's no way to email SetUp which means a trip to a mate's place or a repairer.

Hard Drivin'

For every one of you reading this magazine, there are probably a thousand who think a hard-drive is going from Sydney Stadium back to Penrith in the Commodore, dodging the booze buses, after the Panthers go scoreless against the Roosters (I wish! - Ed). They will pay \$150 for the 'latest' MX400 and use a DFI motherboard. They think that a serious session on the PC is to draw straight lines in MS Paint. They have 32MB of Fast Page RAM and wonder why they can't play Call of Duty while downloading a 40MB crack for XIII on dial-up. In winter, they have to kick their rig out of the way so the 2400W bar heater can fit under the desk. These sorts of people are potential candidates for the Darwin Awards; you know, like the guy that placed his scrotum into one of those wind-around golf ball cleaners and wondered why it hurt so much after just two turns.

Now I'm seriously intimate with one webstore retailer who graciously provides me with some wicked gear at great prices but I'd never get them

to actually fix anything that goes *sput* just before a puff of black smoke drifts out of my blowhole. A friend of mine went from a colour printing business to owning a PC store overnight. Jim's business is about pushing beige boxes out the door to any Mum and Dad that wanders in. He sells me components at cost but you or I wouldn't even look in his store window. He wouldn't know a polygon from a polywaffle and his display shelves reflect his perception of personal computing, with things like a dubious looking Gong Fu USB external plug-in thingy and recordable media from a country I didn't know existed. But if I want something diagnosed, I take it to Jim. If I want some serious electronics fixed, I go to an ex-TV repair guy around the corner, for those times when my FireWire IDE case smokes it up. If I want to bounce some ideas off someone about a problem I talk to a 26 year old guru at my very local PC store. Do any of these businesses have anything in common? Yup. They all have good techies, very good techies - qualified techies. Techies with at least an accredited qualification of Certificate IV in Electrotechnology Computer Systems (if not a Diploma) based on the Australian Qualifications Framework.

You have to find a good techie and

You have to find a good techie and stick with them. Follow them if necessary, interstate...

stick with them. Follow them if necessary, interstate if you must. Jim the printer knows SFA about PCs but he pays his techie a touch over fifty grand a year. The 26 year old gets a little more. How does someone who looks young enough to be in Year 10 get paid that much moolah? How do you get \$50K pa anyway? Only a little over 10% of the population gets 50 big ones each year and I suspect not many are techies, maybe the store owners but not the techies. The employers, like Jim, pay them this much to make sure that they're indifferent, maybe averse, to leaving. Money well spent. Look for the appropriate Certificates and Diplomas hanging on the wall.

My very local store employs a bunch of nice, knowledgeable human beings, including the geeky 26 year old who is actually a nice bloke. When you walk toward the door with a steel box under your arm, someone is there to open the door. They have a special bench to rest your machine (the one that's gone spelunk! all of a sudden) and the sales guy calls out a techie to take your story. No teeth sucking, no embarrassing remarks, lots of "yes sir" and "what were you doing at the time sir?" and if it's overclocked they'll know. So you

these guys are good. If that PC had actually arced up and booted to the desktop, there would've been no charge and a gentle admonition to return at the first hint of trouble. If it was the PSU and Dwane had the five minutes or so it takes to swap one in, it would've cost for the 250 watt HEC and twenty bucks for his trouble. After 10 minutes or so, with Dwane just wanting to flee the scene, the 26 year old techie wandered out and hit the Go button, firing up the PC with its original PSU. The Go button was the little one next to the big Reset button. Dwane had decided to 'rest' his rig one night so he shut it down after it had been running for a few weeks. He'd paid the extra fifty smackers for home installation - he'd neither, ever, turned it on or off, until the night before. People, like Dwane, who write letters in Notepad and send jokes by email do not have to reboot their machines. As far as they're concerned a 'game' is Friday Night Footy or making money from the stockmarket. Dwane had bought his PC from a store like Jim's. Some feeble minded fool had thought that since the most likely answer to a locked up PC is to hit the reset button, why not make the go-again button bigger and brighter. A stroke of genius that PC Case for Dummies. If you can't afford the 26 year old techies, the National Training Information Service www.ntis.gov.au/ can help you find a course and training organisation near you.

Nice techies

They will plug it all in and attempt to fire it up because of the PC Case for Dummies that came in one day. Dwane (his real name) said that his PC would not boot. Nothing happened when he hit the tit. Nada, zip, just the gentle click that usually heralds a wonder of electronics. First thoughts were a faulty switch or a bung Power Supply Unit. Now, I have to say that



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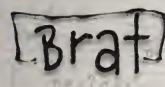
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GAMES IN PREVIEW

Welcome to our new look preview section! This is where you'll find the latest news and screenshots of upcoming titles as well as our hands-on impressions of imminent releases. At the back we'll also round-up the worthy, the interesting and the bizarre new games to be announced or unveiled during the past month. Whether it's the next first-person shooter, the newest hardcore 2D strategy title or even the latest in wacky rhythm action dancing games, we'll ensure there's always something for everyone.

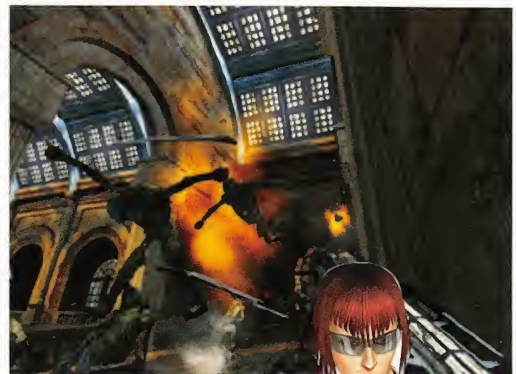
This month sees the French renaissance continue unabated as Ubisoft fills more than half of our space allocated for single-page previews. After making us sit up and finally take notice during the past twelve months (see *Prince of Persia*, *XIII*, *Lock On*, *Raven Shield* and *Beyond Good & Evil*), this year should cement the Gallic publisher's position as a top-tier developer too. *Far Cry* looks set to challenge the established *DOOM* and *Half-Life* franchises in the FPS field; *The Matrix Online* is surely the only massively multiplayer game with a hope of matching *Star Wars Galaxies* for geek-cool cachet; and *Pandora Tomorrow's* unique stealth-based deathmatch experience can only enhance the reputation of the Tom Clancy and *Splinter Cell* brand even further.

Elsewhere, we get our hands on the US version of *Deus Ex: Invisible War* while we patiently wait a little longer for the tweaked and polished Australian release. We could have reviewed it this issue – and it would have comfortably secured a Gold Award – but it's only fair to pass judgement on the version the majority of you will be buying. And we hope you'll be buying it, too. Ignore the flame wars online – Ion Storm has produced a worthy successor.

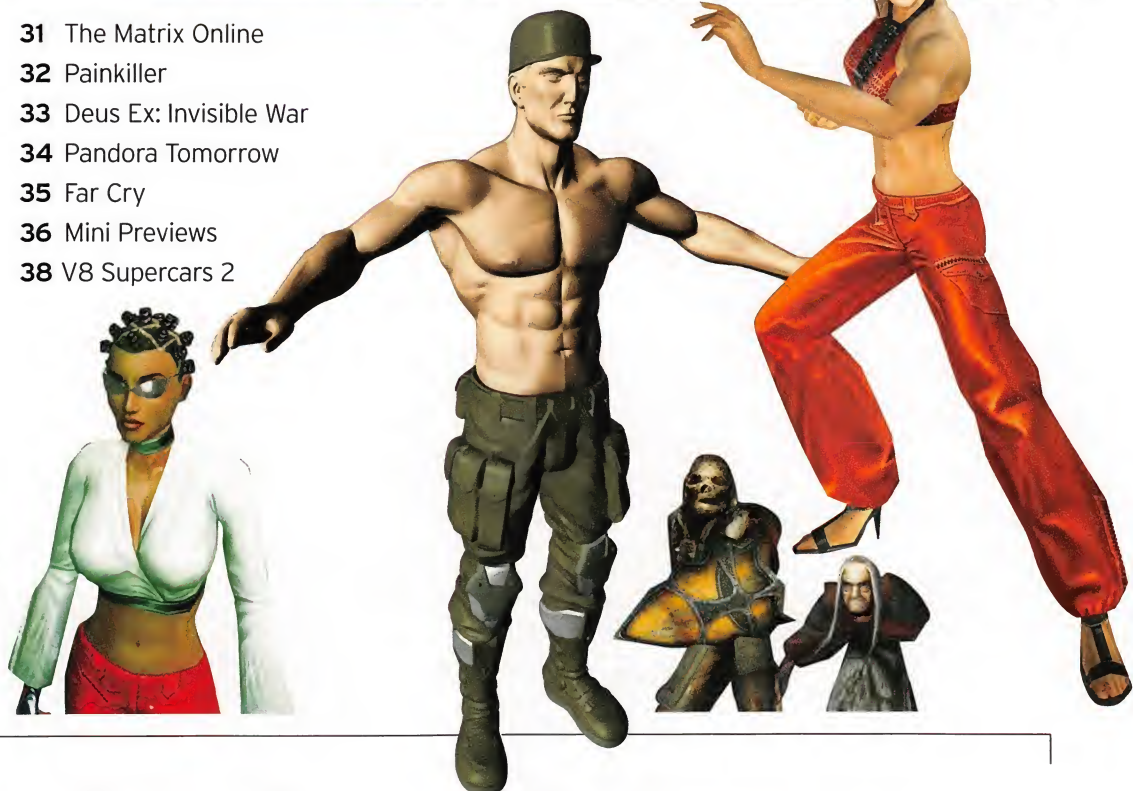
Finally, we take our first look at the upcoming *V8 Supercars* sequel. With the first proving such a tearaway success in this country, we're pleased to see Codemasters sticking to the concept of localising their *Race Driver* franchise for specific markets. We had a tough time with the cover artwork as a result – how could we choose either

Ford or Holden? In the end, we went with the only option that made sense...

**David
Wildgoose,
Editor**



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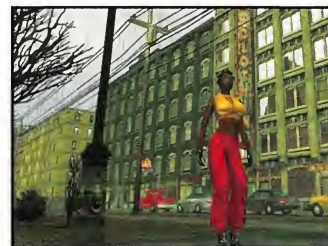


The Matrix Online

A virtual world based on a virtual world based on a... help!



To round out that Matrix feel, a lot of work is going into wardrobe. Players will start with a pretty impressive choice while new clothing options become available with experience and increasing Residual Self Image score. Apparently, there's a woman on staff whose sole domain is producing fashion. What amazes us is that Monolith has actually introduced coloured designs. We though Switch was pretty wild wearing white, but this is just nuts. Maybe the black leather outfits are the ones that become available with time... you can't start looking that hip, you have to work your way up through wool, polyester, vinyl, tan pleather and then onto the good stuff.



If you thought it was all over with the Revolution, you can think again, the Matrix series will live on in computers and stretch across cyberspace in a new massively multiplayer game.

Monolith is being very tight-lipped about the storyline and new factions involved, but it is known that Online is set after Revolutions and that the Wachowski themselves are calling the shots on how things progress after the fade to black of the movie.

If you are wondering what could possibly follow that final scene, the smart is money is on a war between the Zionists, who want to destroy the Matrix and rebuild the shattered surface, and the people who want to keep the Matrix for the luxuries it provides... like sunshine.

Even if you're a bit suspicious of what the Wachowski's have up their sleeves, this MMOG promises a heap of new features that are worth getting excited about.

For one, the whole world is one huge urban zone with no load times once you're in. Furthermore, every room in the game can be entered and you can look out of windows to see what's happening in the street; it's seamless.

The game also tries to offer up the same style of action as the movies, and that includes such features as multiple forms of martial arts to study from Karate to Aikido (and Monolith promises more than 300 animations for each), leaping Trinity-style between buildings, bullet-time, and skill programs that you can download into your character's heads. In fact, these skill programs will become a commodity sort of like something you'd find in a collector-card game, with the super-rare ones giving you the super-cool abilities.

This all ties into the game's unique take on cash and crafting. Crafting will actually be "Writing Code" and since everything is code

in the Matrix, you can eventually craft pretty much anything with the right abilities and resources – including new powers. Cash is also all about code; in this game information is not only power, but money too. Characters generate it by hacking into the Matrix and tapping information nodes. Naturally, the system doesn't take this intrusion lightly and will try to terminate any unauthorised connections (and by terminate, I mean in an Arnie kind of way) so you better hide your tracks well.

When it comes to structured missions and assaults on the system, the game will use Matrix-subsystems to keep your adventures intimate. If you do find another player or group sharing your subsystem it's because the other side sent them and that means war.

Monolith is trying lots of new stuff with Matrix Online and capturing the speed of war Matrix-style in an MMOG is a huge challenge alone, without even looking at the other innovations it's aiming for. This game has quietly been in development for about three years now, and beta is about to begin, so it shouldn't be long until we get more a more concrete idea on how it's coming together. As they say, you can only be shown the Matrix....

Timothy C. Best



Developer: **Monolith** Publisher: **Ubisoft** Distributor: **Ubisoft** Due: **Mid to Late 2004**

Painkiller

Zombies + Witches + high powered weaponry
= lots of gibs and plenty of fun.



There aren't many first person shooters around at the moment. Not! Just when we thought we couldn't bear to sleepwalk down yet another hall way, obliterating all and sundry that dared cross the path of our double barrellled shotgun, along comes Painkiller, breathing a much need breath of putrefying zombie stench into the genre.

If you were to crossbreed Serious Sam with the worst nightmare that Clive Barker has ever had, the horrific offspring would probably look a lot like Painkiller, but with less blood and guts. It appears that the character you're playing, Daniel Garner, has been a bit of a naughty boy, and after getting three shades of crap knocked out of him in a car wreck, is stuck in the void between heaven and hell. After playing a preview build of the game, we'd have to say he's actually much closer to hell, as we didn't see any cute 'n cuddly angels fluttering about in any of the dark and menacing levels. Thank god for that.

And that's about as much as we know about the story, but that doesn't really matter, as this game is all about shooting stuff. Lots of stuff. By the time you complete Painkiller, your pointy finger is going to be the same width as a small child's calf muscle, as you'll be tapping on that left mouse button as if it was supplying you with a dollar coin every time you hit it.

Just like Serious Sam, you'll spend the vast majority of your time fighting off wave after wave of creatures, but this time around they're actually pretty damn scary, rather than the neon coloured cartoon figurines that Serious Sam offered up as targets. A few memorable beasts from our playtime include rancid zombies, who rip hunks of flesh out of their guts before throwing the fetid meat at you, and an evil banshee chick, complete with gut wrenching,

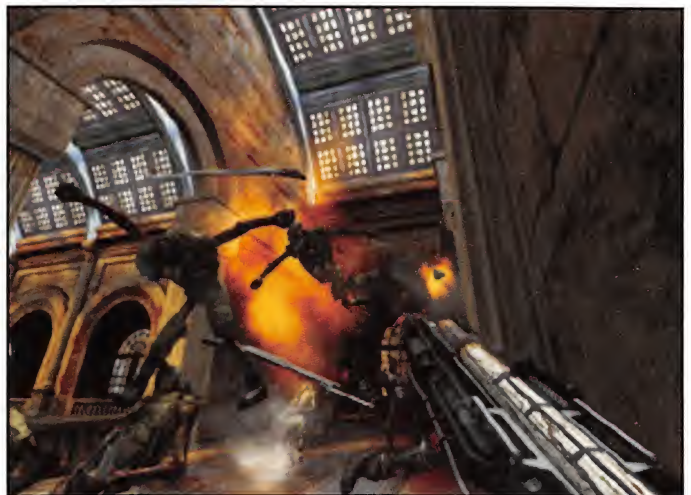


damage-inducing howl. The AI controlling these seemed a little simplistic, just like Serious Sam, but there's no way in hell we'd of had a chance if the endless waves of enemies were rocket scientists. Some of the enemies do have a few nasty surprises up their sleeves though, such as grabbing lower ranked creatures and then using these as a means to break every bone in your body.

If you want bucket loads of eye candy, Painkiller certainly delivers. According to developer, People Can Fly, the engine behind the game pumps out up to 100 times more polygons than rival engines (*Right... - Dubious Ed*), and is complete with a raft of DX9 features to make things look more shiny, smoky, explosivey, or a mixture of all three. Each level looks very different to the others, as the high detail textures are never repeated from one level to the next, and the map makers appear to be some seriously talented people. You want Boss fights? How does facing off against giant sized freaks, usually at least twenty times or so bigger than you, sound? Yep, pretty damn cool.

If there's one problem that Painkiller faces, it's that it's due to ship around the same time as Half Life 2 and Doom III, in the first quarter of 2004, threatening to slip through the cracks unnoticed. But after being thoroughly impressed with our hands on demo, you'd be a fool to let this one slide beneath your radar.

Bennett Ring



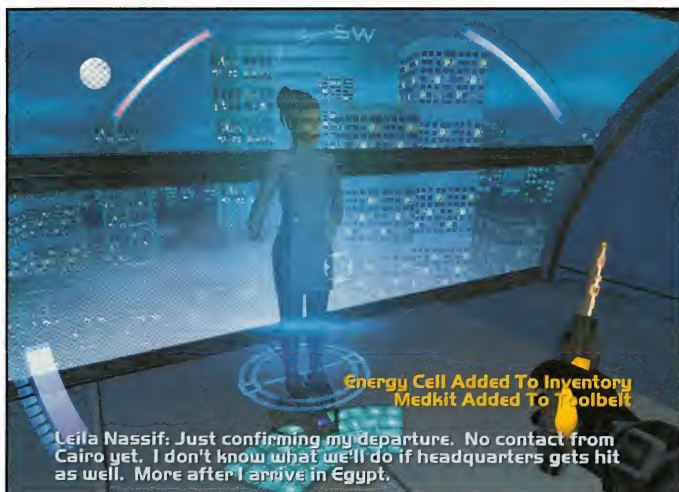
One of the coolest features of the game is the seamless integration of the Havoc 2.0 physics engine, as seen in Max Payne 2. Combine this with a Buffy inspired stake gun, and you'll be grinning from ear to ear as you pin enemies to the walls and ground in countless gruesome combinations. A memorable scene in our demo involved setting off a stack of explosive barrels beneath a handful of corpses hanging from wooden beams, with the resulting swaying effect looking disturbingly realistic. Obviously this isn't the kind of game you'd give to your 6 year old nephew for his birthday. Unless he's an annoying, spoilt brat you'd like to scar for life, that is.

Developer: **People Can Fly** Publisher: **QV** Distributor: **QV** Due: **Q1 2004**

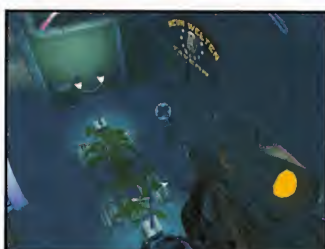


Deus Ex: Invisible War

It's out in the US but we have to wait a few more weeks. Our thoughts so far...



Early on you're faced with the crucial but difficult choice of which bio-mods to install. With 3 canisters, 5 slots and 3 options for each slot, that's a lot of possible combinations that will chart your course over the entire game. It's easy to appreciate why more games aren't like this; most games lead you by the hand because people don't like making difficult decisions. With character development, dialogue, inventory and factional options to consider - not to mention the moment to moment decisions over how to approach any given situation - it's going to be interesting to see whether the mainstream will embrace what is still very much a hardcore game.



The cause of much ire and controversy since the release of the playable demo and US retail version in early December last year, Deus Ex 2 was perhaps always destined to disappoint. However, the reasons for such negativity aren't quite what you may have expected. Far from any gameplay failings (idiotic claims of a 'dumbed down' version of the original, for one particularly galling example), Invisible War is the victim of being rushed to retail with a host of technical issues hampering its performance.

The good news for us is that Eidos' decision to delay the Australian and European release to February means we get the benefit of an extra few weeks of tweaking and bug squashing. The first patch for the US version removes some residual Xbox settings to improve performance and interface functionality, while a second patch (which should be out by the time you read this) promises a further framerate boost and bug fixes. The retail release here will obviously include all patches.

Once you've spent some time with the full version, it's clear a short playable demo was never going to do justice to a game of this scope. The demo level on this month's coverdisc is but a brief snapshot of one possible character combination situated in a small and ultimately, as far as the story is concerned, trivial location. Quite why Ion Storm (or Eidos) didn't choose the game's thrilling opening level to form the demo is bewildering. It not only serves as a well-disguised tutorial, introducing you to the kind of decision making and sheer possibility that frames the entire game, it also teases you with intriguing plot questions and spices it up with a well-paced sense of urgency. Basically, it offers everything that was absent from the hacked together demo level.

For those who enjoyed the original, two elements will immediately strike you as different. For a start, Invisible War actually looks great, thanks in no small part to the deft use of shadows afforded by the real-time lighting system. From the sterile labs of the Tarsus complex to the grimy alleys of Lower Seattle, each location is superbly realised. It's definitely less authentically real world than the first game, but the heightened sci-fi stylings certainly create a more visually interesting environment.

The other immediately obvious element is the factional interplay weaving together the plot and dictating your mission objectives. Initially two factions - the WTO and the Order - will be vying for your attention, but it's not long before they're joined by two more - the Omar and the Templars. Each location brings with it multiple primary and secondary objectives, often contradicting each other as the factions attempt to pull you in their ideological direction. Areas are tighter and more focused (i.e. smaller) than in the original but are comprised of significantly less 'dead space' and feature an awful lot more things to do. Ion Storm has certainly achieved its aim of designing smaller yet deeper environments.

We'll have a full review of the Australian release next issue.

David
Wildgoose



Developer: Ion Storm Publisher: Eidos Distributor: Atari Due: February 2004

Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow

Sam Fisher's new bag of kit goes well beyond the third echelon...



Hanging off the side of a speeding train. Switching his optical cable to thermal vision and dangling it through a trapdoor on the floor. Tackling vast outdoor missions in the Indonesian jungle. Half-split wall-jumping. Sneaking up behind your friend online with your laser sight trained on his skull. Yep, Sam Fisher's got a whole host of cool new toys, gadgets and technology to play with.

Pandora Tomorrow isn't, apparently, Splinter Cell 2. Rather, it's a continuation of the Clancy fiction, the adventures of Sam Fisher, and essentially plays like a new episode in the series.

"I wanted to build on Sam Fisher, make him more human, adding more interesting shades to his character", says script writer JT Petty. "I also want the Sam Fisher games to be like the Jack Ryan books. Instead of creating sequel after sequel, I want the games to be more like season after season; one continuing history with one coherent universe."

Sure sounds like a sequel to us, but who are we to question the wisdom of the Ubisoft marketing department?

In terms of technology and the solo experience, it's very much a case of evolution. Expect a host of aural and visual enhancements to further immerse you in the Clancy techno-thriller world of pan-governmental conspiracies and high-tech counter-counter-counter-intelligence agents. The single-player campaign will also see a greater emphasis on interaction with other (potentially) friendly AI characters.

"National security is more of a human than a technological issue, and I wanted to focus on the human angle of Intelligence," continues Petty. "Fisher will need to interact with and rely on human contacts to complete his missions."

Ubisoft is also pushing the



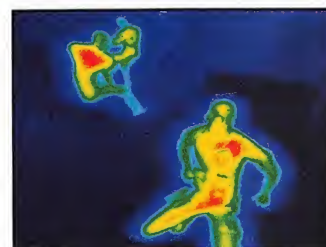
human element in other ways, thanks largely to the intriguing introduction of an online, multiplayer mode. Coming across as similar to the once mooted online aspect of Thief 3, here you'll be hooking up with an as-yet-unknown number of friends for some team-based espionage. The concept is simple: two teams (spies and mercs), two conflicting objectives, one fascinating high-tech game of cat and mouse.

The spies are cast as the mice, progressing towards their given objective whilst attempting to not be seen. The mercs are their feline foes, lying in wait or hunting down the spies in an effort to protect their own objective. Both sides must of course rely heavily on stealth, but their bipolar tasks and varying equipment should ensure a unique approach from each team. For instance, the mercs will initially have access to security systems to monitor the intruding spies, while a key spy tactic might be to disable such cameras.

Care has been taken to tweak the basic game in meaningful ways to ensure its suitability for the online experience. The interface has been streamlined to overcome the lack of a pause function when you delve into your inventory. A first-person perspective has been implemented to reduce situational awareness, thus ramping up the tension and that crucial element of surprise.

The original Splinter Cell was a finely crafted stealth title that clearly signaled Ubisoft's new-found development ambitions. If Pandora Tomorrow can deliver on its bold twin promise of a more interactive, narrative driven tale and a compelling multiplayer supplement, it can only affirm the French (by way of Canada) company's rise to prominence.

David Wildgoose



So far we've only glimpsed one mission from the new game. It takes place on a moving train, zipping through the French countryside at night, and serves to highlight an increased focus on providing multiple solutions. Fisher can traverse the train's numerous carriages by traveling through the inside, shimmying on the outside or slithering along the underbelly. Our demonstration showed Fisher hanging from the roof, timing his hand-over-hand dashes past windows in the breaks between trackside lights. It's very tense, as one false move will alert those inside to your presence, making it significantly more difficult to proceed.

Developer: **Ubisoft** Publisher: **Ubisoft** Distributor: **Ubisoft** Due: **March 2004**

Far Cry

CryTek's superb technology now boasts some compelling gameplay



At the moment first person shooters are more popular than a Burrito barn in downtown LA and certainly it is getting hard to stand out from the madding crowd if you have a game which doesn't shine like the best of them. In this environment you'd think FPS debutantes CryTek would be having a hard time of it with their first game ever Far Cry. The truth is the exact opposite as the German codeshop look like they have pulled off a feat, crafting a game which could compete with the likes of Half Life II and Doom III

Far Cry has graced these pages before, but we recently got to check the latest build out closely at a launch function held in San Francisco. The game looked like it had come a long way even since E3 with much polish being added to the game play when it came to fleshing out the environments and refining the enemy AI.

As you probably know the game is set on a tropical island with you being co-opted as a tour guide by a journalist who wants to explore the place, which is otherwise distant and isolated. Not long after you make landfall you discover that the island is swarming with machine gun toting militia. It is just as well in this circumstance that you are a retired special forces soldier so you know how to fight back. Convenient scripting aside this is looking like a game which is brimming with innovation.

Far Cry's most significant new tricks are that the game features massive outdoor distances and non-linear gameplay. The huge environments are obvious. In a demonstration of the game CryTek CEO Cevat Yerli showed us how you could use a sniper rifle to take a shot at an enemy seemingly safely ensconced in a bunker on a mountain which would have to be all of a kilometer away. Even more impressive (if also a bit odd) Cevat

then demonstrated how he could grab a hang glider and fly toward the enemy, gun blazing all of the way. A chopper even bought into the argument dropping off troops and strafing you. Even though being able to use a gun while hang gliding looked dubious at best, the massive levels are masterfully revealed to the player when gliding about this way.

Far Cry is also about intelligent opponents that aren't spawned in areas as you come across them, but can roam the entire level you are currently playing. This makes the gameplay non-linear as your enemies can co-ordinate responses to your unwelcome incursions and pop up anywhere. There are commanders, radios and alarms that which form a part of the island's defenses and the militia will work together traversing the whole level if need be to deal with any perceived threat

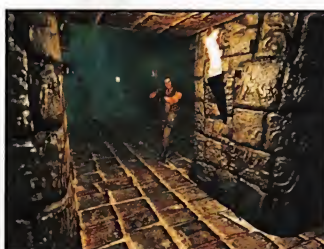
You have to try and stop them from co-ordinating such responses by at times employing stealth when fighting them or even avoiding certain confrontations altogether, waiting for a time which is more opportune to wipe out a squad of guards. This means that there should be no safe havens for you to hide in and you always need to be on the lookout for fresh reinforcements, even when traversing areas which you have cleansed of hostiles.

The game will also use a Metal Gear inspired radar system with green yellow and red blips on the screen indicative of enemy troop positions and their different states of alertness.

Far Cry looks like it will have enough idea of its own to stand out for the crowd, especially if you are looking for a tropical vacation - where you shoot people as well.

Steve Polak

The softly spoken Cevat Yerli, CEO of Crytek knows his team are under pressure to deliver now that expectations have been raised so high. However the team have gone through several iterations of the game design adding in all sorts of elements. The game features vehicles, stones you can throw to distract guards, deformable terrain, different multiplayer character classes and you can even hold your breath when sniping to maximize the accuracy of your shot. The polybump technology they have developed which makes it possible to display high detail characters with intricate skins is also a tad special.

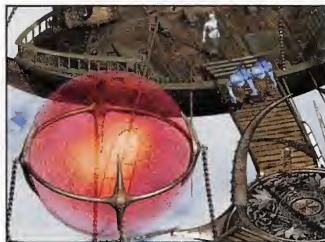


Developer: **CryTek** Publisher: **UbiSoft** Distributor: **UbiSoft** Due: **March 2004**

Golden Land: Cold Skies

Developer: Russobit-M
Due: Q2 2004

Russian developed RPG in the Lionheart mould, Cold Skies is apparently situated in a land of conspiracies, revolutions and "determined, hard-edged women". Surely an intriguing proposition.



Ultima X: Odyssey

Developer: EA
Due: February

One of the enticing features of EA's fantasy-styled online world is the concept of dueling other players. Issue a challenge, maybe even lay a small wager (just to make things interesting), then battle it out for bragging rights.



True Crime: Streets of LA

Developer: Luxoflux
Due: March

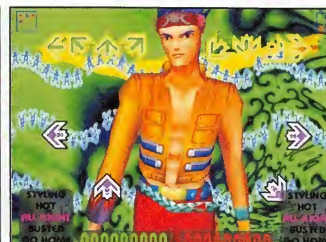
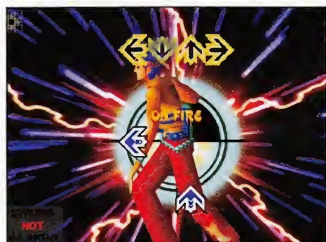
You may have heard of this, Activision's take on the whole GTA thang. Only this time it's a) set in Los Angeles, b) is clearly delineated into driving, shooting and fighting bits and c) features Snoop Dogg.



CyberGroove

Developer: Front Far East
Due: Q1 2004

From outta Taiwan comes this, the PC's first dance mat based rhythm action title. It features splendidly trippy visuals and an original soundtrack that daringly spans genres from R&B all the way to Pop.



Universal Combat

Developer: 3000AD
Due: Q2 2004

From Derek Smart comes Universal Combat, aka Battlecruiser Millennium. A name change was required once Smart's ambitious design took the game beyond its space-based roots and into land, sea and air combat.



Mythica

Developer: Microsoft Game Studios
Due: Q2 2004

Rewly revealed character classes include the Demonologist, who can summon spirits through portals to alternate realities, and the Berzerker, who wields dual weapons and prefers taking on multiple foes at once.



Castle Strike

Developer: Data Becker
Due: TBC

All we know about Castle Strike is "ist ein RTS, das den Spieler ins Mittelalter versetzen wird, die Welt der Burgen und Ritter." It's German and we don't understand German. It looks a bit like Total War, we guess.



Xenus

Developer: Deep Shadows
Due: TBC

The first STALKER clone. Set in a 25 square kilometer environment, Xenus is a free-form action role-playing game. There are no levels, just a wide open map, one objective and a host of ways to accomplish it.



Middle Earth Online

Developer:
Turbine Entertainment
Due: Q4 2004

The inevitable massively multiplayer spin on Tolkien's tales. Players can mine resources to craft their own weapons and armour or build and decorate their own houses. No word on whether Gollum is a playable race.



World Championship Rugby

Developer: Swordfish Studios
Due: March

From the developer of Jonah Lomu Rugby (which was quite good), WCR promises to be the hardest-hitting rugby game yet. The screenshots show potential, but the World Cup's going to be a distant memory come March.



Warlords Battlecry 3

Developer: Infinite Interactive
Due: Q2 2004

Unlike the recent Warlords IV, Battlecry is a game of real-time strategy with role-playing elements. Developed by our very own Infinite Interactive, we'll bring you more news soon if we can afford the cab ride there.



Perimeter

Developer: K-D Lab
Due: Q2 2004

We love K-D Lab. They did Vangers, you see. Now, here's Perimeter, a game of more orthodox genre (RTS) yet still obviously designed by the same warped mind as Vangers. Now published through Codemasters.



Republic Commando

Developer: LucasArts
Due: Q4 2004

One of two new Star Wars titles slyly announced in recent weeks, this is a single-player first-person shooter, presumably in the Jedi Knight vein. But hopefully better than Jedi Academy.



Savage

Developer: S2 Games
Due: March

An ambitious title in every way, Savage promises to combine first-person action with real-time strategy within a team-based framework where players either fight on the frontline or sit back and command their underlings.



Spartan

Developer: Slitherine Strategies
Due: March

Old-school strategy set during the internal warring of Ancient Greece. Like the Total War series, you plan your empire on a 2D map before resolving conflicts on a real-time 3D tactical battlefield.



XPand Rally

Developer: Techland
Due: TBC

Our good friends at Techland in Poland regularly send us breathless press releases - and we delete them soon after. So we've forgotten what amazing features XPand Rally has, but here's some pretty pics.





V8 Supercars 2

Face it, you're never going to be a V8 Supercar driver. Don't feel like a loser though, as **Bennett Ring** checks out a game that might be almost as good, and won't cost you a cool couple of million and several visits to the intensive care ward.



One of the most ambitious racing games of recent times is Codemaster's V8 Supercars...

Why is it that fangling around a track at 250+ km/h is such damn good fun, even when you don't get to plough through innocent pedestrians, covering your windscreen in a thick film of gooey blood and nuggets of brain matter? Note to self: stop playing first-person shooters so much. Where was I – oh yeah, racing games. Taking out your fellow drivers on the final corner after a gruelling 60 lap race delivers a feeling of satisfaction not often found in other genres, and the level of unflinching concentration that is required to be the first through the chequered flag is second to none. Take your eyes off the screen for a mere nanosecond during a tough race, and before you know it you'll be doing a fine impersonation of a metallic tornado of carnage.

One of the most ambitious racing games of recent times is Codemaster's V8 Supercars, also known as Race Driver, which covered such a wide gamut of

different race varieties that it was destined to have a few issues. It turned out to suffer a little from the jack of all trades, master of none syndrome, although it wasn't all bad, with an interesting career mode and lots of variety to be found in the various race types.

It obviously pumped a few shiny gold coins into Codemasters' coffers, hence the announcement of a sequel, imaginatively titled V8 Supercars 2, or for the rest of the world, Race Driver 2. How do those creative geniuses come up with such catchy titles?

One of the most innovative features of the original was the campaign mode of the game. Instead of being a nameless driver tasked with simply completing one race after the next, the game borrowed elements from the RPG and Adventure genres. You filled the sweaty racing boots of one Ryan McKane, and it was your duty to lift his career from that of total racing wannabe, to the ultimate



Developer: **Codemasters** Publisher: **Codemasters** Distributor: **Atari Australia** Due: **April 2004**





goal of Super Happy Fun World Champion. Or maybe that was in the Japanese version.

Unfortunately many users still didn't feel as if they were the guy with his career and mortgage on the line, due to the third person perspective of the story scenes. To remedy this in the sequel, you are the driver who needs to prove his metal, all played from a first person perspective, which will hopefully deepen the attachment players feel to their virtual racing careers. Strangely enough the developers have now chosen to use full motion video rather than the cut-scenes using the game engine that were seen in the original. This is supposed to aid immersion, but we've got a feeling the game designers had smoked some particularly strong crack the day this decision was made.

According to Gavin Raeburn, Head Producer of Race Driver 2, this has resulted in more believable story scenes. "By using FMV instead of the real-time playback system employed previously," he argues, "we have been able to use far more

realistic characters and environments, which greatly enhance the experience." Sorry mate, but I beg to differ; there's a reason FMV is rarely used these days, and that's because it tends to shatter immersion when compared to in-engine cut-scenes.

While the 35 vehicles contained within the sequel isn't exactly a ground breaking number, with the likes of Project Gotham Racing 2 having over one hundred intricately detailed beasts, the massive number of racing genres it covers certainly is. Yanked straight from the press release is this impressive list of racing modes: Open Wheel Grand Prix, Super Truck racing, Stockcar Oval Racing, Rally, Rallycross, Ice-Racing, Formula Ford, Classic Racing, Convertible Racing, Street Racing, GT Racing, and Performance Cars. It's hard to believe that this one game is covering such a diverse range of driving styles. You might think that as a result it wouldn't be faithful to each, but Codies think they've solved this problem.

"We have worked hard to avoid this issue in V8 2," explains

It's hard to believe that this one game is covering such a diverse range of driving styles

Raeburn. "Our very comprehensive physics model fully emulates all of the key mechanical components of each vehicle, using all the major real-world vehicle parameters. This makes it surprisingly easy to tune each car to handle like the real thing. Every vehicle in the game from a V8 car, to the Supertrucks, to the Formula Fords, all handle as you would expect, each with their own unique personality and nuances to master."

Integral to the success of a racing game is the physics engine, otherwise known as "How far can I push this car before: a) the engine explodes catastrophically b) I slide into a wall, resulting in answer a, or c) I lose the back end, resulting in a combination of a and b." The physics engine of the original turned out to be one of its sore points, especially when it came to using a steering wheel, so we were pleased to hear

that this has been rewritten from the ground up for the sequel, with a 100% new physics engine.

"We've had a lot of fun playing the PC sim 'Live for Speed', and our goal was to get better physics and improved keyboard, pad and wheel handling than that game," Raeburn outlines. "We've achieved this by some considerable margin, especially for the rear wheel drive cars, and this has meant that we have been able to lock down the handling very early in development so we can spend the time tuning all of the many different vehicle types we have in the game." Isn't it refreshing to hear a developer admit that he looks at a competitor's product, and then aims to flog it into the ground like a whimpering little lamb?

An extra slathering of goodness on top of this revamped physics engine are some promising crash



we are now able to realistically deform and squash all sections of the car right up to the central cockpit area...

modelling techniques. It's been a while since we've had a hardcore racer where it's possible to have a single, race-ending crash, but Supercars 2 promises to change all that, as Raeburn explains:

"To make this possible, the collision and damage systems needed to be rewritten with more accurate and efficient algorithms to allow us to crumple the car up much more without giving rise to unexpected artefacts. This means that we are now able to realistically deform and squash all sections of the car right up to the central cockpit area, i.e. a head on crash at 100mph will totally destroy the front of

the car, sending shock waves running through the car, creating ripples in the metal work and shattering all of the windows." Now if that doesn't sound like a good way to kill the next six months of gaming time, I don't know what does.

Getting smashed into the wall at high speed by AI drivers, just as you're about to take the perfect line around a corner, is not fun. And it happened all the damn time in the original V8 title, so can we expect

more of this infuriating behaviour this time around? Apparently not, as Codemasters are now repenting for their evil AI sins.

"You won't get rammed or tail flipped under normal racing conditions," Raeburn promises. "We also improved the way the AI cars navigate around the track, allowing them much more freedom to perform tricky overtaking manoeuvres on corners and chicanes. The overall effect is that the AI cars now race faster and more intelligently, but also less aggressively."

The graphics engine behind Supercars was a bit of a mixed bag – it didn't look particularly bad, nor did it look particularly impressive.

However, thanks to the team focusing on the PC version first,



and the resultant power that is just waiting to be untapped, the sequel is using a raft of graphical trickery to result in a much more visually impressive game.

You want pixel shaders? You got 'em – these magical code sprinkles will be used for such things as iris effects, specialised reflection maps, accurate shadow casting and true motion blur. While you'll probably be hooning around the tracks far too quickly to make out individual blades of grass on the trackside, if you do happen to opt for a nice Sunday afternoon pace, the use of procedural standing grass routines will allow you to bathe in the glory of millions of blades, each of which is individually lit. Finally, a trebling in the number of polygons makes for much more detailed cars and scenery. Unlike the original, the entire graphics engine is being developed in-house, which makes you wonder why the devs ever went with a middleware engine in the first place.

As you can see, things are certainly looking up for this sequel, with the list of improvements over the original being most impressive. If all goes according to plan, V8 Supercars 2 should offer a unique racing experience; one that looks great, has a massive variety of styles to master, and includes some of the coolest crash effects seen this side of a high speed automotive collision simulator. Get ready to start your engines in April, 2004.



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PC PowerPlay

G.O.T.Y.

Game Of The Year

Have your say!

Welcome once again to the most prestigious, publicly decided game awards in the country. They're prestigious because PC PowerPlay is the most respected games magazine in Australia. They're publicly decided because YOU vote for them.

So, taking the popular demand thing to its logical conclusion, we've revamped the awards this year, reinstating the much pined for genre categories. This means you can now vote for your favourites across twelve different categories. Hurrah! We picked the most obvious genres we could think of, then selected five nominees

in each category for you to vote for. Of course, if you don't agree with our selections, that's what the 'Other' option is for - just write (legibly, please!) your own choice in the space provided.

All votes will be considered and tallied, except obviously silly ones like putting Call of Duty in the Sports category, for instance. And, don't forget, the game must have been released in 2003 or reviewed in PCPP between issues 84 and 95.

So vote now (and, hell, vote often, if you want!). All entries must be in by February 3 and the results will be unveiled in PCPP 98, on sale March 10.



Send your entry to:
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VOTE NOW!

Instructions!

Cut out or photocopy this page and send it to:
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Best Shooter

- ☐ Call of Duty (Activision)
- ☐ Max Payne 2 (Take 2)
- ☐ Raven Shield (Ubisoft)
- ☐ Tron 2.0 (EA)
- ☐ XIII (Ubisoft)
- ☐ Other _____

Best Strategy

- ☐ C&C Generals (EA)
- ☐ Haegemonia (Take 2)
- ☐ Rise of Nations (Microsoft)
- ☐ Sim City 4 (EA)
- ☐ Warrior Kings: Battles (Red Ant)
- ☐ Other _____

Best Sports

- ☐ CM4 Season 03/04 (Atari)
- ☐ NHL 2004 (EA)
- ☐ Pro Evolution Soccer 3 (Atari)
- ☐ Tiger Woods 2004 (EA)
- ☐ Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4 (PICA)
- ☐ Other _____

Best Sim

- ☐ Flight Sim 2004: A Century of Flight (Microsoft)
- ☐ Freelancer (Microsoft)
- ☐ IL-2 Forgotten Battles (Ubisoft)
- ☐ Lock On: Modern Air Combat (Ubisoft)
- ☐ Trainz 2004 (Auran)
- ☐ Other _____

Best Racing

- ☐ Dirt Track Racing 2 (Atari)
- ☐ Midnight Club 2 (Take 2)
- ☐ Moto GP 2 (THQ)
- ☐ NASCAR 2003 (Vivendi)
- ☐ V8 Supercars (Atari)
- ☐ Other _____

Best RPG

- ☐ Arx Fatalis (Red Ant)
- ☐ Gothic 2 (Red Ant)
- ☐ Knights of the Old Republic (EA)
- ☐ Lionheart (Vivendi)
- ☐ Temple of Elemental Evil (Atari)
- ☐ Other _____

Best Action/Adventure

- ☐ Grand Theft Auto: Vice City (Take 2)
- ☐ Prince of Persia: Sands of Time (Ubisoft)
- ☐ Return of the King (EA)
- ☐ Silent Hill 3 (Atari)
- ☐ Splinter Cell (Ubisoft)
- ☐ Other _____

Best Online Game

- ☐ America's Army v2 (Dubya)
- ☐ C&C Generals (EA)
- ☐ Desert Combat (Battlefield 1942)
- ☐ Planetside (Ubisoft)
- ☐ Shadowbane (Take 2)
- ☐ Other _____

Best Expansion Pack

- ☐ Civ 3: Conquests (Atari)
- ☐ C&C Generals: Zero Hour (EA)
- ☐ Medieval Total War: Viking Invasion (Activision)
- ☐ Neverwinter Nights: Shadows of Undrentide (Atari)
- ☐ Warcraft 3: Frozen Throne (Vivendi)
- ☐ Other _____

Best Mod

- ☐ Counter-Strike v1.6 (Half-Life)
- ☐ Desert Combat (Battlefield 1942)
- ☐ Eve of Destruction (Battlefield 1942)
- ☐ Natural Selection (Half-Life)
- ☐ Real GTA3 (GTA3)
- ☐ Other _____

Overall Game

- ☐ Call of Duty (Activision)
- ☐ C&C Generals (EA)
- ☐ Grand Theft Auto: Vice City (Take 2)
- ☐ Knights of the Old Republic (EA)
- ☐ Max Payne 2 (Take 2)
- ☐ Other _____

Worst Game

- ☐ CTU Marine Sharpshooter (Red Ant)
- ☐ Hulk (Vivendi)
- ☐ Judge Dredd (Vivendi)
- ☐ Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness (Atari)
- ☐ Wolverine's Revenge (Activision)
- ☐ Other _____



The Real Digital Filmmaking

Machinima is the art of filmmaking using game engines. Daniel Wilks goes on the virtual set to find out what it's all about...



makers

Interviews – I have a love/hate relationship with interviews. On the one hand they are fun and exciting and it's always nice to hear something straight from the horse's mouth but on the other there's only so many times you can hear a PR spiel and sanctimonious back patting before it begins to grate on your nerves. I've been lucky so far that most of my interviews have revealed some heretofore unknown information and have often opened my somewhat jaded eyes to something I hadn't known or heard of before. Last month was such an occasion. Although you wouldn't think that id software and a group of Deus Ex modders would have anything in common they both made reference to something I had never heard of before – machinima, or the art of filmmaking using game engines. Sure I had seen examples of the medium before with the ongoing Anachronox movie and the infamous Warthog Jumping videos but up until last month I had no idea there was a name for it, let alone a movement. Being a film person myself and an ex-actor I had a number of questions to be answered, not the least of them being how I'd managed to miss the emergence of a new film medium that was literally growing right under my nose...

Portrait of the director as a young monster

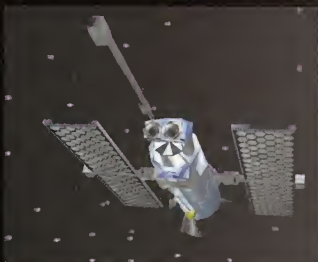
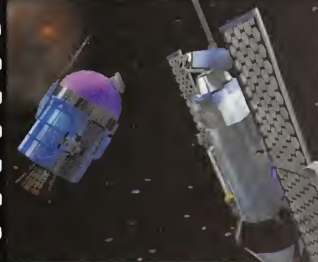
Now if you're wondering why you can't remember any reference to machinima in last month's id interview it's for a very specific reason. I realised that this whole machinima thing warranted a whole feature unto itself, heralding another opportunity for yours truly to get paid. While

talking to Tim Willits about the levels to which DOOM 3 will support modding, he said, "If you know what machinima is, there's a high level of anticipation in the community to be able to use DOOM 3 as a tool for that sort of stuff." I didn't want to admit my ignorance at the time so I let him continue:

"The quality of the rendering in a real-time basis is actually approaching what could only be accomplished previously with Renderman quality pre-rendered, those sorts of tools. Now with the real-time lighting model and bump-mapping on all the surfaces, you know the world can be made at an incredible level of detail and really sort of approaches on a real-time basis what companies like Pixar and movies like Final Fantasy were doing on a pre-rendered basis."

My interest in machinima was peaked further during my conversation with R.M. Burton of the Ghost in the Machine DX mod, who announced in PCPP that the mod was in fact being converted into a feature length film. This awakening to a new genre of film spurred a furious downloading spree that gave (and is still giving) my flat mates hernias due to them having to put up with severely throttled internet speeds due to my obsessive downloading. It also inspired an even more obsessive email campaign as I contacted every producer of machinima in the hope that they would agree to an interview so I could delve deeper into the art form.

Although not all of the machinima makers responded to my pleas for an interview we still did get an overwhelming response from a number of groups and individuals more than eager to pimp



SEE IT ON DVD!

PCPP is currently in negotiation with all of the nominees and winners of the 2003 Machinima Awards to put their films on the cover DVD. Over the coming months you will see Halo soldiers battling it out with words in Blood Gulch, satellites fall in love, solo incursions into enemy territory and even an experimental poem.

The Real Digital Filmmakers

their wares and explain to us little people the why's and wherefores of the emerging medium. Being an ignorant little bunny myself I opened with a fairly straightforward question, asking for the various groups to describe, in their own words exactly what machinima is and why they have chosen to work with the medium. The first response came from a group calling themselves Dead on Que, creators of the critically acclaimed, award winning machinima, Fake Science.

"Our involvement was at first an accident, trying to do what we assumed hadn't been done before, a feature length film in Half-Life," revealed a secretive Mr Que. "Then we were contacted by a group of filmmakers who called their technique "Machinima". From there, the rest is history. The reason we have chosen to work in this unique medium is the fact that it is still a fairly new technique, and there is a lot of new ground to cover".

Although Dead on Que didn't exactly say what machinima is, they did give me a good starting point for further questions. Luckily, Hugh Hancock, artistic director of Strange Company, the creators of Ozymandias, an experimental

machinima nominated for best technical achievement in the 2003 Machinima Awards came to my rescue.

"Machinima, simply put, is the art of using a virtual world, often a games world, as a movie set, in the same way you'd use a space in the real world," Hancock explained.

Peter Rasmussen of Nanoflix, an Australian machinima group expanded on the topic even further, adding, "Machinima is animation in a game engine. A feature of some shooter games is the ability to record the combat. The movie file is not digital video, it's a record of every event that took place during the game. Like a piano roll, the movie simply puts the puppets in the game



through the sequence of events as they were recorded. These files are tiny so people in the game community would post them on the web so anyone with the same game engine could see what a great game they played. Soon people worked out animated films could be made this way."

Thunderbirds and Killer Robots

Perhaps a more interesting question than what machinima is concerns what advantages it has compared to conventional filmmaking or animation - it's all well and good for a new medium to arise but if it's so damn fiddly that all but the most 1337 of individuals can't do it what's the point?

Once again Hugh Hancock came to my rescue, saying, "It's incredibly fast compared to conventional animation whilst not being as limiting as normal film - hence, it's very appealing to a film-maker like me because it means I can make films with far fewer restrictions than if I was working in other media. Because of its real-time nature, it's more similar to puppetry, like the techniques Gerry (Thunderbirds) Anderson used to use, than conventional animation. This makes it a lot, lot faster and cheaper to produce than conventional



CGI. However, it's still in an imaginary universe. If I want to shoot a two-thousand man WWII battle, or film a car chase, I can do that without having to invest millions of dollars (or, more to the point, persuade someone else to)."

Unfortunately after such a straightforward answer our Australian contributor then threw a spanner in the works.

"One advantage is that in its executable (game engine) form a full-screen feature-length film can exist as a much smaller file than video. In the game engine form Killer Robot at 70min running time is only 30MB; as full screen video it would be 1GB. The main advantage is rendering time. With conventional animation a ten-second scene

Battlefields, Unreal & Quake too!

After receiving the responses from the interviewees there remained no doubt in my mind that there are some serious advantages to machinima, but rather than dwell on the fact that it was cheap and easy I pressed on, grilling each of the groups about which engines or scripting tools they prefer to work with and why. To no one's surprise they all had their definite favourites.

The Dead on Que guys are currently working nearly exclusively with Unreal technology because "the import tools for characters and animations combined with the sophisticated camera/scene management tool Matinee give us huge levels of control, not currently available anywhere else in PC games."

Q2TV.RU, a group of mad, enthusiastic and somewhat incomprehensible Russian gamers use the Quake 2 engine and KeyGrip2 tool, "because for that time it was most popular game, and Q2 because it was most powerful and easy to use Q2 demo editing tool."

Hugh Hancock on the other hand takes a more professional approach, saying, "Our preferred tool at the moment is 'Antics', which hasn't been released yet, but which is the first professional-grade Machinima toolset. It is leagues ahead of anything else available, offering advanced AI (characters can interact with objects without

the art of using a virtual world, often a games world, as a movie set in the same way you'd use the real world

can easily take ten hours to render only to have some part of it that needs to be fixed. With Machinima there is no rendering time. The game engine renders on the fly."

Why did this throw a spanner in the works you may ask? Well up until this point I had been assuming that all machinima took the form of some form of media file and that the game engine was simply used to render the scene which was later converted into video. A little research later and yet another download spree was prompted as I discovered that aside from videos, machinima can take the form of executable files like the Nanoflix films Killer Robot and Rendezvous, mods requiring the viewer to have the game engine installed in the first place such as A Warrior's Dream and even film made using unmodified engines using players as virtual actors, such as the critically acclaimed, very funny and multiple award winning Halo machinima series, Red Vs Blue: The Blood Gulch Chronicles.

The Dead on Que crew threw a more mercenary spin on the proceedings, stating, "The biggest advantage, depending on the nature of your project, is cost and flexibility. For the average Joe gamer, recording a playback of a game can be done for little more than the cost of the game, and as simple as hitting record. Or, if a group wishes to move closer to conventional/professional animation, they can invest in higher-end editing software (3D Max, Maya, Photoshop, Premiere, and so forth,) and use them to ramp the visuals of their films to a pro/studio level".

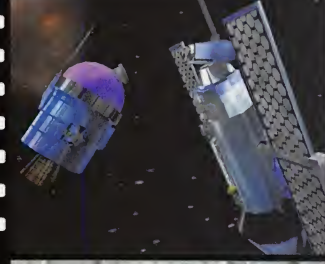


specific scripting, for example) and multi-pass recording amongst other features. We also work with other engines, though, including Half-Life and Neverwinter Nights (which, functionality-wise, is very close to Antics in some respects, but not all)".

Finally Rasmussen of Nanoflix chimed in with yet another choice. "I work in GameStudio. It's a professional game-authoring package I have adapted for the purpose. Game engines like Quake and Unreal are open to modifications but I work with GameStudio because it's more like a blank

slate. I animate in a conventional animation package called TrueSpace. This program spits out the piano roll of coordinates and I use GameStudio to instantly play back the results."

Four responses, each with a different favourite



MACHINIMA ACADEMY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

If you want to find more information on machinima, different machinima groups or just download films until your eyes bleed, visit either: www.machinima.org or www.machinima.com
If you can't find what you're looking for there it probably doesn't exist.

The Real Digital Filmmakers

and still by no means a full cross-section of all of the engines that can be used; a little trawling around the web and you can find machinima made with just about any engine at all. Many films have been made recently using unmodified BF1942, utilising all of the players on the server as actors. All of the Quake engines have been used, hell, one group has even made a feature length film using Dark Age of Camelot, a film with a cast of literally hundreds of virtual actors. The simple fact of the matter seems to be that you should just work with what you are comfortable



with and what serves your needs – if you can get everything you want out of the Pacman engine, go for your life and make a movie.

Storyboards and scripts

Now I knew the what and why about machinima there was one major question left to ask – how. How do you go about taking an idea from inside your head and turning it into an animation available to everyone with the capacity to download?

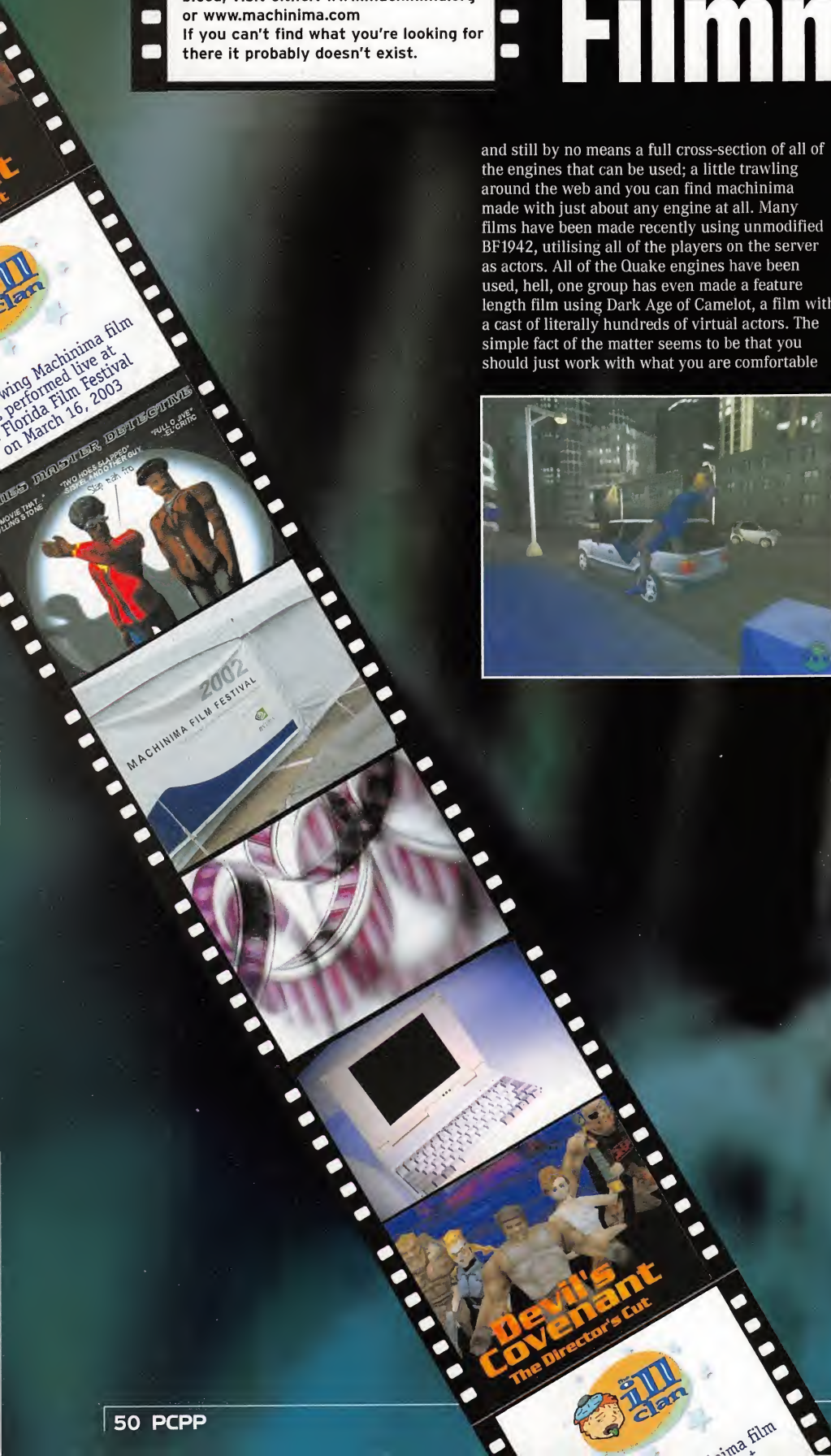
"This is a process that changes depending on the project at hand," began Dead on Que, "but for the most part we follow the standard short film schedule. Come up with some ideas; draw some locations, props, and characters; flesh out a storyline, write the script, and draw storyboards. Then we take a hard look at our current game engine, decide if it's the best tool, if not we search for a better one. Once we decide on which engine to use, we work on the art. Be it 3d, 2d, or what have you. Then we bring it all together in the engine editors and set it up like one would a real movie set. Then once every thing is placed, and animated, we place the cameras and record.

"Post production varies depending on the project, sometimes we are forced to film out of sequence and edit in video editing software, and more often than not we can just convert it to .avi or QuickTime and release just how it is. Of course leaving the film in a game playback format is just as possible."

Hugh Hancock of Strange Company has a similar approach: "More or less the same way you would create any film – first, we have a concept, which we work up into a two or three page story 'treatment' and then a full script. We develop concept art for our characters and locations, often a storyboard of the film, and record voice actors direct onto digital equipment.

"From there, we build our characters and sets in whatever 3D software the toolset requires, before bringing them into our chosen engine, where we network up our computers and 'act' out each shot in turn, using the virtual world of the game or toolset as a stage. This action is captured using Adobe Premiere as conventional video. Once we've done that, we then edit the video, add sound and music as you would for a conventional film, and then release to whichever medium we're working in – DVD, broadcast television or the web."

Peter Rasmussen on the other hand adopts an approach more akin to directing a play: "The script is written like any film script. I keep throwing ideas around until I think of something I like. A plot list usually follows. Often fully formed scenes present themselves. The right place for the scenes has to be found in the plot. A treatment stage allows me to get an overview of the story. Once I'm satisfied the framework is there I create the dialogue.



"The shoot is done in sequence. I re-read the appropriate section of script. I think about what the characters are trying to do in the scene and block out the movement. I animate the characters according to the blocking using a wide camera to get a general idea. I then do the camera coverage to bring the scene to life. Finally, I look at the scene in GameStudio to refine movement and camera."

Gone are my dreams of an easy filmmaking process – it seems fairly obvious that the process of making a film in machinima is just as laborious as making a normal film – though there is the added advantage of not having to deal with as many horrible industry professionals (trust me – the vast majority of film people are horrible).

The new wave

For my next question I took a far more ephemeral track and asked each group what they thought would be the future of the medium they are in the process of making their own. As I had come to expect, all of the answers were markedly different but always informative.

To start with the Q2TV.RU nuts agreed with Tim Willits' initial assessment of Doom III: "DOOM 3 promises to be a useful engine for machinima makers so we expect a new wave of growing machinima mania."

"As the games get more sophisticated and the



visuals on a micro budget."

As with my usual modlife interviews I thought I would end my talk with the machinima artists by asking them if they had any advice for anyone interested in making machinima themselves – they were more than happy to chip in their advice. Dead on Que got the ball rolling with the heartfelt plea: "Stay short, stay simple. Never release your first film to anyone but your close friends and family. Grow into the art, and it will grow into you. If you rush out of the gate to overrun Pixar, you will trip under your own weight and never make it around the first turn.

many films have been made recently using Battlefield 1942, utilising all the players on the server as actors



community grows, we will start to see more and more A and B quality work," Dead on Que responded. "Most will remain fun, fan-made films of their favorite games, and more will still attempt story and drama, but I predict a few epics will be released in the next few years that will give machinima a new worldview, no longer just Quake-guys and trippy music videos, but seen as genuine film and animation, as a medium like all others, with ups, downs, and for the most part, downright entertaining".

Finally Hugh Hancock brought it all down to the mighty dollar stating: "It's going to get much bigger. We're already seeing it increase in size with new tools like Unreal Tournament 2003, but it's going to explode in the next couple of years as games like Half-Life 2, DOOM 3 and The Sims 2 offer people the promise of nearly Pixar-level

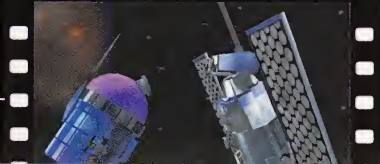
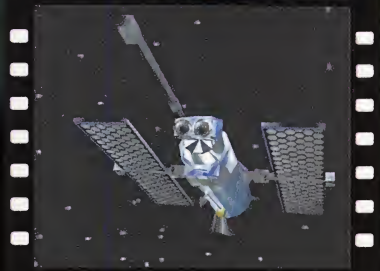
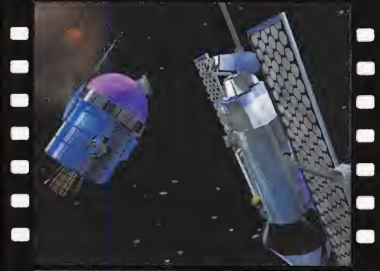
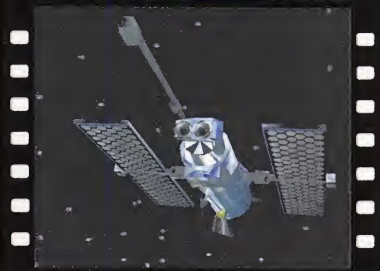


Ambition is great, but focus it on the perfection of your work, not what it gains for you, and it will bring you all you need. Know your tools, and don't be afraid to ask questions."

The crazy Russian's advice was to ask for advice, er... advising, "Don't be afraid to ask the more advanced machinima makers - they will help!"

Although the above two pieces of advice are great, leave it to an Australian to condense years of wisdom and knowledge into a few simple and succinct words. I'm going to leave you now with the same piece of advice Peter Rasmussen left me with. If you want to make a machinima, simply, "Keep it simple. Tell a story. Begin it."

Now go out there and make movies. I want to see them all.



SHIELDS FORWARD

Firewalls? Booooring...

Yes, firewalls aren't exactly the sexiest things out there, but unfortunately, regardless of whether you administer a home network with broadband, or just have a single computer with a dial-up connection, protecting your machine while you're online is more important than ever.

There's a great need for internet access – patches, driver updates, email and (of course!) online gaming, but the problem is that the second you go online, you're exposed in some way. Your IP address is publicly accessible, and any casual hacker who happens to be scanning the range of IP addresses which includes yours has free reign to probe your computer's defences, gather information and attempt to hack you – either stealing information from your machine, damaging your files, or using you as an unwitting staging point for forwarding spam or virus replication.

The quickest and best way to protect yourself is to make use of a firewall. Basically, firewalls are applications which examine incoming and outgoing IP traffic, and can permit or deny any IP packet access to its destination, based on a given ruleset, which the administrator (that's you!) specifies. Firewalls come in different shapes and sizes. The most popular are the Windows-based ones which are active when you start up (like ZoneAlarm), and chug away in the background, monitoring what goes in and out of your network port. You could also take a more professional approach and use a standalone box as your firewall. These boxes normally run Linux (whichever your favourite version happens to be), and their firewalls are managed through ipchains. Having a box like this can be fairly complex to set up, but creates an extra layer of security between your internet connection and you – there's a school of thought which believes that if an IP packet can make it to your network port at all, it's already Game Over.

Another solution which combines ease of



installation as well as heightened protection is a hardware firewall. These devices hang off your broadband modem/router, and perform the filtering on the fly, protecting any and all computers connected to them. This is probably the most expensive option if you go for a fully-featured standalone firewall, but if you have broadband, you'll find that most of the routers on the market these days have firewall functionality built in, and this is generally sufficient to protect your system.

Can't think....brain hurts...

Implementing an effective firewall means coming to terms with some key features of home networking – it's hardly fascinating, but it is important!

IP Filtering

This is basically the core feature of a firewall – looking at IP packets and assessing their header information for type and destination, and working out their threat level. Filters can specify whether a range of IP addresses is to be blocked or trusted, whether a particular kind of packet is acceptable

(like MSN traffic, for example), or whether a particular port is to be made inaccessible (like incoming port 80 for web traffic, if you've decided to host a web server on port 8080).

Port forwarding

This is only used when the firewall you are running is external in some way – either a hardware firewall or a dedicated machine which also acts as a gateway. Forwarding is used to specify that an external request made on a particular port should be forwarded to a specific IP address. A common example is when a web server is hosting on port 80 – rather than open port 80 to the world, simply specify that incoming traffic on port 80 should go to the IP address of the web server, where the hosting application will pick it up and process it as normal. Other examples are FTP, VPN and Telnet.

This technology is also useful if you are setting up a game server – you need to be able to have incoming connections be accepted and go to the right machine, and port forwarding will let you achieve this.

NAT – Network Address Translation

This is a feature used by gateways, whether they are internet gateways or broadband routers. It's really a networking feature but it acts as a basic level of protection too – the gateway handles ALL requests for internet access made by computers connected to it, no matter how many. This means that any computer on the Internet you connect to sees the request coming from one specific IP address (usually the one assigned by your ISP), but it cannot tell whether the request came from Computer 1, 2 or 3. As far as the remote machine is concerned, they are all one and the same.

The advantage of this is that it provides a level of anonymity for your networked machines, as any

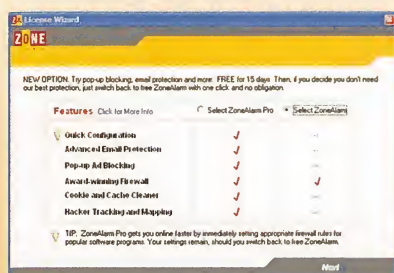
potential hacker will hit the NAT router first, and depending on how you've configured the router will have a hard time in getting any further.

Step By Step...

Let's look at setting up a firewall from scratch – what you need to consider, which ones to go with, and how to make your machine as secure as possible against all those back-hacking port-sniffers out there.

The first thing is to think about which firewall solution to go with. Obviously, you don't want to have to pay for it, and fortunately there are a few great ones out there which are freeware like Sygate Personal Firewall. The most popular free firewall, however, is ZoneAlarm (24 million downloads of the latest version from Download.com so far!). So, get yourself off to <http://www.download.com>, and search for firewalls – ZoneAlarm 4.5 will be in the list. Follow the download links and grab the package. You can also go directly to the company website at <http://www.zonelabs.com>. The package is just under 5MB, so if you're on a modem dial-up you might want to consider grabbing this at work, or over a friend's broadband connection.

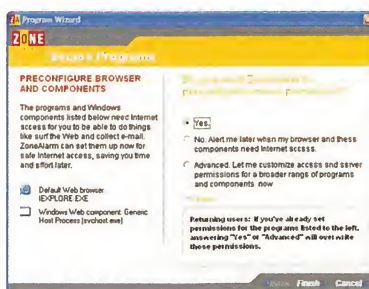
Run the setup.exe and fill in the little details box and user survey – it really doesn't matter if you use accurate details or not, the software will still install. ZoneAlarm Pro offers lots of really cool features like ad blocking and hacker tracking, and the free version gives you the option to try it out for a 15-day trial period. If you can't live without the extra features, you'll need to buy the software, but you can go through the trial period without your free version being affected.



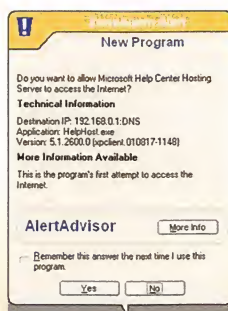
ZoneAlarm will ask you a few basic setup questions – whether you want it to protect your machine silently, or to alert you each time it blocks traffic. We would recommend the silent option – when you're happily blowing away noobs in your favourite FPS there's nothing worse than an alert popping up and minimising your game to the task bar!

Looking out

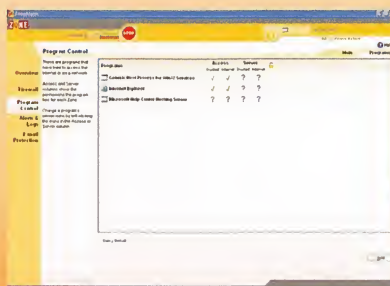
ZoneAlarm will also ask you whether you want to preconfigure access permission. This can be daunting, because it's basically asking you which applications you want to allow to access the network, and there are a hell of a lot more than just IE and Outlook. Many system components of Windows like Explorer, Media Player and even the Help feature will try to access the internet without you asking them to, and there are a stack of services, system EXEs and DLLs which will also try to scamper off to the Microsoft mothership without you knowing – you'll be amazed at just how chatty Windows really is.



The problem here is that it's just too difficult to get everything right the first time, so the best option is to let ZoneAlarm do the work for you. It will allow IE and svchost.exe automatic access to the local LAN and to the Internet, and it will prompt you any time a new application on your machine asks for network access – the firewall will halt the requesting application until you give it the thumbs up or down.



Every application which requests access gets logged in the Program Control view – this allows you to go back later and change a selection you made. Perhaps you denied access to Gamespy accidentally (or perhaps on purpose once you realise how shit it is – Bennett) – just click on the corresponding question mark or red cross and change it to a tick – done!

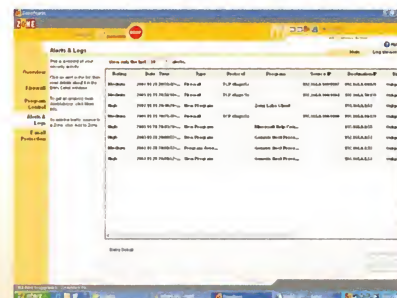


Games want to jump online quite a bit too – if you have a broadband router which is also your DNS gateway (as most of them are – DNS is Domain Name Service, which lets your machine look up the names of other machines; either local ones or remote ones – websites, in fact!), then the game will at least want LAN access, and will probably want to check back with its homesite for patches and updates. When choosing to allow or deny this activity, it's a good idea to tick the checkbox on the alert which will make ZoneAlarm remember your choice, otherwise it will ask you every single time...and that gets seriously boring after a while.

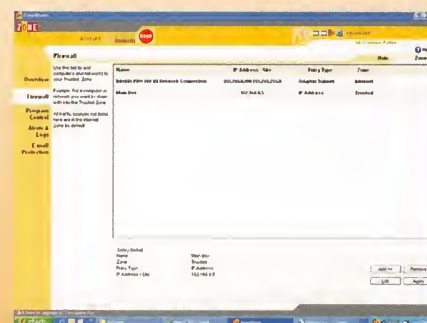
And looking in

So far we've looked at the internal aspects of a firewall – how to prevent your own machine having an active social life without you knowing – but the whole reason we're here is to look at controlling the external aspects...stopping malicious traffic from grabbing you by the ports and disrupting your cosmic balance.

The reason why ZoneAlarm rock our world is because it locks your external access down completely – if you want anything to get in you have to specifically allow it, and this is where the Log Viewer and Zones pages come into view. Take a look at the Log Viewer (Alerts & Logs/Log Viewer). This shows you what kind of traffic has attempted to access your machine in a given time frame – what protocol, which port, originating IP address and so on. If there's something in there which you recognise and want to allow, simply highlight it and click "Add to Zone" and select "Trusted". You'll be prompted for a description before you can save the new entry (just for ease of recognition later on).



Now, go to the Zones page (Firewall/Zones), and you can see a new entry with the remote IP address and description you specified.



To see how secure your system is with the firewall installed, check out Shields Up! (<https://www.grc.com/x/ne.dll?bh0bkyd2>). This is a great website which will scan your machine for open ports and give you a report on what it was able to find out about you – similar to a hacker scan, but not at all dangerous. Do a scan with the firewall disabled, and then re-do it after enabling it to see the difference. Using ZoneAlarm, every single port in the TCP range (this is the common range from 0-1056) reports as being in "stealth" mode. This is vastly better than simply "blocking", as blocking means that something on a given port at a specific IP address is actively resisting being probed, which only serves to verify its existence. Stealth mode means that to the casual, or even dedicated observer, no-body's home, Mr Anderson...



Tiny Firewall

<http://www.tinysoftware.com/>

Tiny Firewall incorporates intrusion detection, application protection and advanced system and data protection. It is a multi-platform firewall, and any rulesets created for it can be instantly applied to other Windows-based machines (W2K and upwards). It can also protect local resources on a machine like the CD-ROM and hard drive from being accessed by malicious applications. It automatically blocks unknown trojan-type traffic, spyware and viruses, and is fully compatible with Windows 2003 server.

Pros: Strong firewall with system resource protection

Cons: Not freeware, doesn't have many privacy features

Score: 65/100

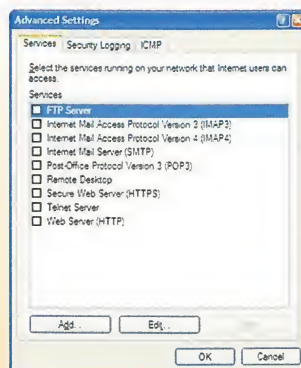
65
100

Got XP?

If you're running Windows XP, you'll be interested to know that it has basic software firewall capabilities built-in. Go to Settings/Network Connections and right-click on your main internet connection, whether it's your modem or network port. Select Properties, and go to the Advanced tab. Tick the box to enable the firewall, and click on Settings to do some configuring.

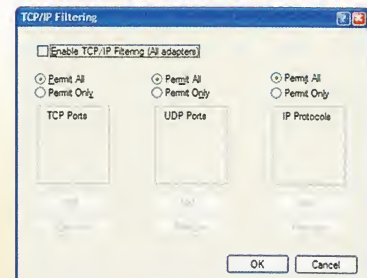


The Advanced Settings screen lets you choose whether you want to allow any of the basic services listed. Selecting one will bring up a window asking you for the name or IP address of the machine hosting the service – basically this is port forwarding. You can also click on Add to add a service which is not listed – for example you might be running a web server on port 8080, which is not the default.



The ICMP tab lets you determine how your machine is going to respond to messaging requests, allowing you to mask your machine's presence when connected to the internet.

The only drawback of the XP firewall is that it doesn't help you to lock down applications or services. By default, it lets your applications have all the access they want, and won't ask your permission. It also has quite a basic list of incoming requests which can be configured, so to



And now for the hard stuff

The main advantage with hardware firewalls is that they can protect multiple machines at once, and you don't incur any CPU overhead on your computer by running a software firewall. The only downside is that they're quite expensive, and for a typical SOHO user, there's really not much point in investing in a stand-alone firewall solution. A much better bet would be to invest in a hardware broadband router with inbuilt firewall capabilities. These are much more reasonably priced, and have a stack of other features which make them useful – broadband authentication,

like buying a car alarm with engine immobiliser, motion detector and GPS theft tracking for your FJ Holden...it smacks of more than a little overkill

really lock your machine down, it will take some serious manual configuration, which is not so great if you don't have the time to commit. Having said that, it's not a bad basic firewall, and could be used in conjunction with another freeware package as an extra layer of security.

IP filtering

The only downside with free firewall programs and in-built firewalls is that you can't perform really specific filtering. Say you want to grant access to just one port from one IP address...you can't do it. You can only allow/deny an IP address or IP range with ZoneAlarm, or an external port with XP firewall. A little-used way of enhancing your security features is by using IP filtering, which is a standard configuration option on any machine with TCP/IP installed.

Just go to the properties of your internet connection, select TCP/IP from the list of installed components and click Properties. Click Advanced and go to the Options tab. Highlight TCP/IP filtering and select Properties. Tick to enable filtering, and you can then specify which ports or protocols you want to allow or deny. Bear in mind that if you select "Permit Only" for any option, then all ports/protocols you don't select will be blocked. And this feature applies to ALL network adapters, so be careful if you have more than one, or you could find yourself unable to communicate at all.

NAT, switching and port forwarding.

We'll assume that only SOHO networkers will be considering a hardware solution – if you've got a dial-up connection, using a hardware firewall is like buying a car alarm with engine immobiliser, motion detector and GPS theft tracking for your FJ Holden...it smacks of more than a little overkill.

Configuring these devices is generally done through the web interface, or through Telnet if you really want to get your teeth into it. The firewall component is generally quite straightforward, and not as in-depth as a software firewall. They tend to offer configuration options like trusted IP addresses and address ranges, but don't offer as much detail in terms of traffic and event logging. However, as a stand-alone device they're quite good at protecting a small network.

Something in the middle perhaps...

Got a spare computer? If so, you might want to consider a compromise between a hardware or software firewall. Setting up your own external firewall on a spare machine can be a great way to get the benefits of multiple machine protection and offloading the firewall overhead, while not having to spend a bomb on a new firewall router.

The great thing is that you don't need a fast computer to do it. The old Celerons or Pentium 2s do a great job (something even slower will manage it too). Just install Windows 98SE, 2000

or XP (they all have internet sharing), install ZoneAlarm and let it chug away happily. You'll need internet sharing because you'll need two network cards in this machine – one to connect to the broadband modem/router and another to connect to the rest of the local network. The great thing with this set-up is that you can incorporate it to protect a modem connection too. Just plug the modem in and enable sharing on it – the firewall will protect the connection and incoming requests from the local network for internet access will make the modem dial. Just be careful

ipchains, which is an open-source firewall, and which abso-fricken-lutely kicks butt. It's 100% configurable, and you can do anything with it – block any port, any IP address, any application. Plus, it's free (as Linux is free!). The only downside is that it's not for novices. There are plenty of websites and tutorials out there which will help you, and Linux doco is usually very helpful, but at the end of the day you'll have to get your hands dirty to have a completely bulletproof firewall. But you WILL have a completely bulletproof firewall with ipchains.

the safest way is to get your gaming partners to tell you their IP addresses, and you can add them to a trusted zone for the duration of the game

with this, though – as mentioned earlier, computers are chatty, and you can often find your modem dialling up simply because an application has asked it to instead of you.

If you're running XP on the firewall machine, you can enable the standard XP firewall on both network cards (or network card plus modem), and perform internal and external blocking and filtering. In this scenario, the firewall log can be a good source of information about which applications are accessing the internet, and you can use this information to prevent them from passing through the firewall machine and out into the big blue yonder.

If you're feeling really brave, you might want to consider installing a flavour of Linux onto this external box. Most versions of Linux ship with

And don't forget Shields Up – if you're doing manual firewall configuration, this website will help you to find out which ports are still open, helping you to lock them down further.

What about gaming?

If your favourite online game connects to an external server, running something like ZoneAlarm is good, as you will be alerted to the request, and you can allow the connection. If you are the server, then you'll need to do some planning. Really, the safest way is to get your gaming partners to tell you their IP addresses, and you can add them to a trusted zone for the duration of the game. It's annoying, sure, but it's safe, and you're still protected from any other nasties, so you can play away with peace of mind. If you're at a LAN party and if you trust everyone there (and hopefully you do!), then you could simply disable the firewall.

If you're a game server, and people are connecting to you remotely, the same process applies, but if you're using a broadband router as well, you'll need to open up a specific port to allow remote users through. The first thing is to find out which port the game operates on. This information should be readily accessible from the manual, or from the developer's website. If you can't find the information there, check with the online community for that particular game, or even connect to a remote game server yourself, and use a port scanner (or firewall!) on your own machine to see which port the game is connecting from. Sometimes the from port is not the same as the to port, but it's a good start.

Assuming you get the port information OK, you'll need to forward that particular port from your router to your machine. Connect to the router's configuration page – this is usually a web page hosted on the IP address of the router (eg: <http://192.168.0.1>). You can usually also Telnet to the router if you feel so inclined, but the web interface is much simpler for those who don't particularly love networking. Jump into the configuration area, and select Port Forwarding. Obviously, this will vary between models of routers, but the screenshot will give you an idea of what you're looking for.



Armor2net Personal Firewall

URL: <http://www.armor2net.com/>

Armor2net incorporates advanced privacy features to the standard firewall settings. It can scan your registry and hard drive for trojan and spyware applications, and assist you in removing them. It displays any current connections to and from your computer, making it much easier to monitor traffic on your machine, and you can use these reports to quickly allow or deny an application access to or from your machine. It also incorporates an ad blocker, preventing annoying and potentially damaging popup browser windows.

Pros: Strong privacy features plus fully-featured firewall

Cons: Not freewares



Sygate Personal Firewall

URL: http://smb.sygate.com/products/spf_standard.htm

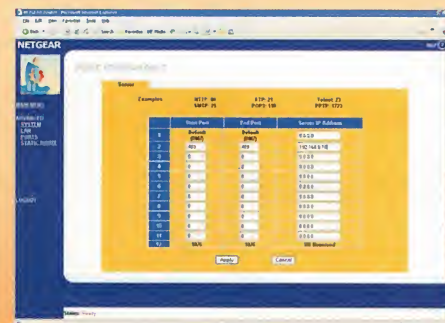
The Sygate Personal Firewall is a free, fully-featured firewall for home users. It has many advanced security features, like application blocking, DLL authentication, trojan termination, enhanced logging features and an easy-to-use user interface. It can also trace attacks back to their origin. It is compatible with Windows internet sharing, and its rules can be applied to specific interfaces, making it a powerful firewall solution on a dedicated network gateway. It also upgrades smoothly from any previous version, and is compatible with an Active Directory environment.

Pros: Free, fully-featured

Cons: Sygate saves the really good features for the Pro version

Score: 80/100

65
100



Enter in the port number which the game server has to run on (it shouldn't need to run on a range, but confirm this first), and enter in the IP address of your machine (the game server). Save and exit – you shouldn't need to restart either the router or your machine for this to take effect.

So what's best?

In the end, it depends on what kind of home configuration you have, but always work on the rule that more protection is better than less. ZoneAlarm (or any one of the software firewalls available out there) is a great start, and coupled with a firewall router and/or IP filtering, you should have a great base of security, especially with the stealth features which ZoneAlarm brings. Plan your firewall in the knowledge that it's dangerous to rely on one level of security alone, as it won't protect you completely, and that the only thing better than blocking attacks is avoiding them in the first place.

UNDER THE HOOD

Two and a half years ago Medal of Honor: Allied Assault taught the developers of Return to Castle Wolfenstein a harsh lesson - gamers prefer historical WW2 shooters to fanciful, occult-driven survival horror fests. Since then, a dozen WW2 shooters have passed across our reviews desk, yet until Call of Duty was released late in 2003 MOHAA was indisputably the king of them all. Is MOH: Pacific Assault set to tip the balance once more in EA's favour? With the console-only Medal of Honor: Rising Sun dominating the charts and played by thousands of Japanese teens who don't realise they're gunning down digital representations of their own grandfathers, it looks likely that a PC WW2 shooter set in the Pacific Theatre is likely to do well.



MEDAL OF HONOR: PACIFIC ASSAULT

What do you get when you take a WW2 shooter, get rid of Nazi zombie beasts from Hitler's hellish biolab, set the whole thing in the Pacific and present it all wrapped up in a world-beating 3D engine? You get Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault. **Anthony Fordham** heads for the jungle to take a closer look.



as the game design. We haven't announced this new feature at this time, but stay tuned.

PCPP: What is the balance of scripted sequences versus real AI? What new AI routines have been included for the new game?

Bell: The term 'scripted sequence' has taken on a negative connotation in games lately and I'm unsure why that is. With Pacific Assault, we're aiming to create more dynamic encounters with the AI. The goal being that players will see enemies behave differently based on the player's actions and enemy morale, while scripted sequences will be used to help convey story and key moments in gameplay. Overall, the goal is to have as few scripted or predetermined combat situations as possible.

PCPP: Will MOH:PA run on PCs that ran MOHAA? What specific new hardware will let gamers see a dramatic increase in visual quality?

Bell: While the system requirements for the game have not been set, it's safe to assume that to get the most of Pacific Assault, an upgrade in specs is needed. By the time this game ships,

Allied Assault will have been available for two and half years, so an upgrade seems in line. We certainly aren't creating a bleeding-edge, hardware only game though, so you can count on support for an older generation of video cards.

PCPP: What are the current anticipated system requirements for playing the game the way the designers intended? (ie, with a decent level of detail)

Bell: This hasn't yet been decided.

PCPP: Will the game ship with any modding tools? What will be included in the distribution?

Naturally, we here at PCPP wanted to know how EALA intends to keep the Medal of Honor franchise at the next level, and were intrigued at the challenges the developer was facing. After all, rather than simply upgrade the existing MOH engine, they've opted to completely rebuild the game using a brand new proprietary engine. As a result, gamers can expect to see significantly improved vegetation (vital for jungle combat), ragdoll physics, advanced explosions and much more detailed modelling of shock waves, water effects and currents.

PCPP spoke to MOH:PA's lead designer Brady Bell about the project to see exactly how the game will sell itself as the next big thing in World War 2 shooters.

PCPP: What are the most significant improvements from the most recent MOH engine?

Bell: The two big changes that jump out are in rendering and physics. We've switched over to a DX9 renderer to accomplish the amount of geometry needed to create both the natural environments and character fidelity we're after, as well as to take advantage of more advanced pixel shaders. In Pacific Assault, physics is another major addition to the franchise.



necessary to further interaction and immersion in the world. The AI has been rewritten to more accurately depict the Japanese tactics of WWII, as well the fundamental differences in jungle versus urban combat. The balance of physics, AI and rendering are what we'll spend the most time developing, tuning and balancing.

PCPP: What new features have been implemented for sound support? Does the game have unique sound requirements, and how does the engine address them?

Bell: The MOH franchise has received many accolades in the audio department, so we're always looking for ways to push the bar even higher. We've come up with something that should raise both the quality, as well



an engine is only as good as the artists and designers using it...

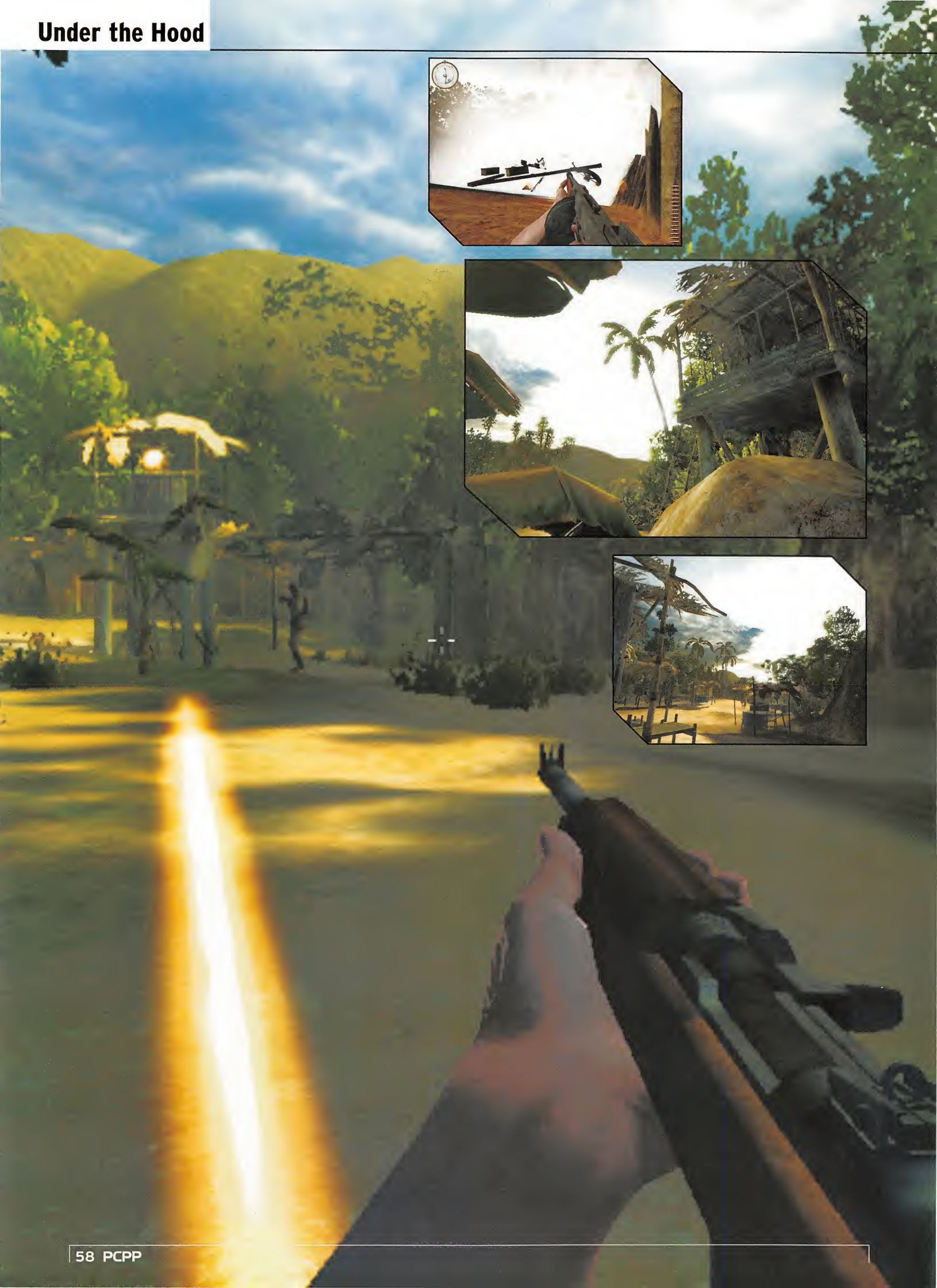
PCPP: What unique challenges does the brief of MOH:PA give to engine designers and programmers?

Bell: The biggest challenge is gaining expertise with in-progress technology across all disciplines. Regardless of specs, an engine is only as good as the artists and designers using it - so nothing can replace the importance of artists becoming effective with technology over time.

PCPP: Could you give us a rundown of the most impressive new features of the engine?

Bell: All technology decisions were born from the paper design of Pacific Assault, meaning every feature serves an imperative role to building a great game. The renderer change was needed to recreate the lush environments of the Pacific Theatre of Operations. Physics were







Allowing other games to dictate what features you add or remove from your own game is always bad news...

Bell: We have several community-minded features going into the game. Aside from improving performance and UI (server options, filters, etc), we're discussing more robust items like an expansive SDK, stat ranking and tracking, etc. When and how some of these rollout has yet to be decided, but EA is really supporting the teams' desire for community support.

PCPP: What have you learned from your competition in the industry? What engines have really made you sit up and think "yes, we have to do that for MOH:PA" or "MOH:PA will do that better"?

Bell: Honestly, we don't look at competitive

product as a deciding factor for our game. There are plenty of games in development that I'm inspired and impressed with... but only to the point where I can't wait to play them. Allowing other games to dictate what features you add or remove from your own game is always bad news and detracts from your core design.

PCPP: How much overhead does the physics engine incur on the CPU as a percentage of CPU cycles?

Bell: It's tough to state emphatically. On console hardware there's a clearer matrix of performance cost against number of instances (ie. x characters with active ragdoll will cost y) with a third party physics packages. With our title, physics is broken down into several groups, each having a different cost depending on the

complexity of the collision hull, the number of bones being calculated, the detail of the geometry it's colliding with, etc. It's like asking how much a new car costs - it depends on what the car has and what it can do. Bottom line, cars and physics are both expensive.

PCPP: What are the maximum number of characters the game can render on screen at once? Similarly, what's the maximum draw distance before fogging drops in?

Bell: There's no limit we're working with. Albeit in a simple environment, we dropped 115 characters running animation and AI with acceptable performance. If we put that number of characters into a complex scene with physics and effects, we'd overburden the game and framerate would go to hell. It's a balance issue that our game designers and artists work with, trading off for the needs of individual levels.

PCPP: What main things will make MOH:PA stand out from the crowd? What will make gamers step back and say "woah"?

Bell: More than anything, it's very unique. MOH has never been a one-trick-pony or had the gimmick feature that makes it memorable. MOH is the sum of its parts gelling together into a unique gaming experience. We

intend to build on that tradition with the addition of lush environments, procedural AI, physics and character progression.

While EALA is being understandably coy about specifics, it's probably okay for us to go ahead and expect big things from this game. Just imagine - major assaults up horribly garrisoned hills, charges down narrow jungle trails, last ditch stands in shallow creekbeds, MOH:PA will have everything that made great films like Windtalkers and The Thin Red Line stand out. Well, maybe not Windtalkers. But The Thin Red Line surely - although don't expect simulated baby birds spilled from simulated nests by charging GIs, or indeed ants running across barbed wire. Although, then again, this may be a good thing.



MUM'S THE WORD - MULTIPLAYER

Curiously, Brady Bell wouldn't be drawn on the multiplayer aspects of MOH:PA. It's perhaps understandable, since the game will aim to realistically implement AI squad tactics for both Allied and Japanese soldiers. We were interested to know how this would operate across a network, and whether players could include AI squad members in multiplayer games. We were also keen to know if dedicated Linux servers would be supported - 486 MOH:PA server in the corner of the room anyone? However, EALA has decided to keep mum on the issue.



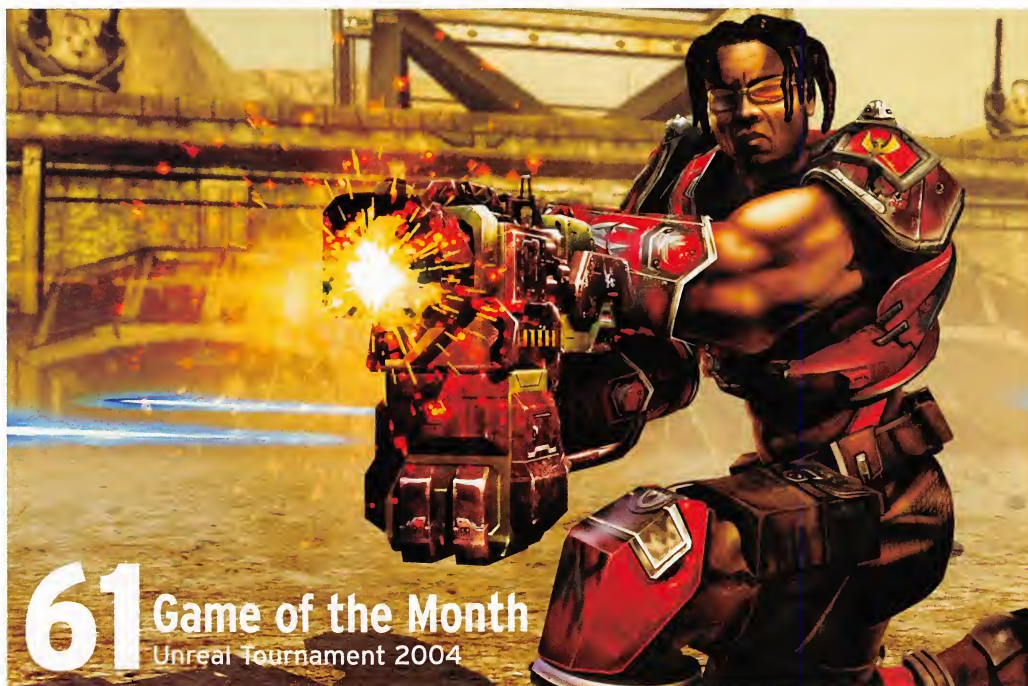
GAMES IN REVIEW

After last issue's wealth of reviewed riches, this month sent us crashing back to earth. You might be tempted to think that publishers had deliberately held off on sending us code in order to delay reviews until after the crucial pre-Christmas period. You might even suspect these publishers weren't entirely convinced of the quality of their wares. The really cynical may even go as far as implying that publishers wanted to ensure enough clueless suckers purchased their crappy, rushed-to-store games before anyone had the chance to yell, "Wait, don't do it!", in a stern voice. Not naming anyone...

Our Game of the Month isn't a pre-Christmas title but rather one that won't be available until mid February. Why review a game so far in advance? Well, if you were offered the chance to fly to North Carolina and play UT 2004 on a LAN against the developers, would you say no? Actually, at first we were slightly hesitant, thinking that perhaps it would just be UT 2003 but with vehicles. True, to a certain extent it is. But after thoroughly testing the new modes (including the wonderful Onslaught) and experimenting with those vehicles, we realised our initial scepticism was misplaced. And, of course, UT 2003 was pretty damn sweet to begin with. Let's hope the online community embraces this new version rather more enthusiastically than they did last year's - Epic deserves the love.

Next issue: Deus Ex 2, finally!

David Wildgoose
Editor



61 Game of the Month Unreal Tournament 2004

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| 61 Unreal Tournament 2004 | 71 Judge Dredd: Dredd vs Death | 78 Dungeon Siege: Legends of Aranna |
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| 67 Secret Weapons over Normandy | 74 Korea: Forgotten Conflict | 81 The Simpsons: Hit & Run |
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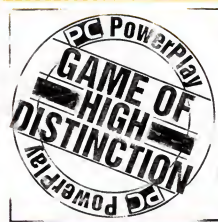
GOLD AWARD



The ultimate accolade. A game that receives a Gold Award is an essential purchase, and the only excuse for not owning it is either not having a powerful enough PC, or not having a PC at all. Or arms. It represents a new direction in gaming, a new benchmark against which all others will be measured. It defines its genre, or creates a new one. It is gaming. You must own it.

90+

HIGH DISTINCTION



This is the finest in gaming. A fresh concept, a perfect execution, a meaningful extension to a tried and tested format, one or all of these are required for this score. We strongly recommend the purchase of each High Distinction game, but extremely fussy gamers may want to skip those HD games that don't also receive Gold Awards.

85-100

DISTINCTION



An intriguing new concept or a bold new direction that manages to pull its new trick off with a reasonable degree of flair. You will be impressed, at either the graphics, the gameplay or some other new element that you may not have encountered before. Or perhaps this is a familiar gaming concept, but one executed so well it's almost - but not quite - an essential purchase.

75-84

CREDIT



Solid, playable, largely bug-free, entertaining and maybe even a bit unexpected, these are the hallmarks of a game of Credit. You may have seen it all before, but you won't mind, because a Credit game does what it says on the box - it plays well and it keeps you hooked. An essential purchase? Not necessarily, but worth consideration.

65-74

PASS



A game that receives a pass is playable, but its concept may be flawed, its extras may be lacking or its graphical enhancements may have fallen off somewhere in a lengthy bug-fixing process. And bugs there may be, although in the end the game will, as we say, work. Purchase if you're curious, but discerning gamers will probably look for something more substantial.

50-64

FAIL



There are more than 5000 games released each year. Some are gems. Some are merely unremarkable. Others are nothing more than a shameless grab for cash. Graphics will be rudimentary and gameplay will be worse. If you see someone considering a game that has failed, gently take them by the elbow and hurl them out of the shop. It's your duty as a good citizen.

0-49



Unreal Tournament 2004

DW from PCPP goes OS to NC in US for UT

Developer: Epic ■ Publisher: Atari ■ Distributor: Atari ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: M15+ ■ Available: Mid Feb

It's a long way to North Carolina, the home of Epic, around 20 hours in the air each way and a couple of connecting flights to be precise but that's where we had to go to have a look at the upcoming Unreal Tournament 2004, their latest multiplayer opus. To add difficulty to the trip the person who booked the tickets over there forgot to take into account the different time zones across America so left yours truly with enough time to run between the connecting flights and nothing else. North Carolina is also deathly cold but ultimately it didn't matter, because I spent my few scant days in the States wrapped in the warm glowing warming glow of UT. Although not a revolution in the art of multiplayer gaming and in many respects very similar to UT 2003, the 2004 iteration adds vehicles, a slew of new maps, new game modes and some fantastic new models, making it a necessary purchase for any fan of the series and a serious consideration for anyone who loves a good fast multiplayer game.

One thing the UT franchise has always been praised for is the number of maps that come bundled with the games, and 2004 is absolutely no exception to this rule. Although the code reviewed wasn't 100% complete and the final map count

YOU TALKIN' TO ME?

UT 2004 is all about voice integration; it's as simple as that. Aside from supporting real time voice chat in games, UT 2004 also supports voice commands for bots in single player as well as the ability to convert any text message to voice. The other journalists, myself and the developers took great pleasure during our time together discovering which words the computer could pronounce well (the winner being "that rOxOrs my bOxOrs") as well as trying to spell made up words that would sound like various bodily functions.

hasn't yet been ratified, players can expect to have around 45 new maps to blast their way around as well as all of those that shipped with UT 2003. If that's not good value for money we don't know what is. As with 2003, the maps are well designed with a good balance between indoor and outdoor environments. Although most of the maps are playable in every game mode, as can be expected some of the maps are specifically tailored to the new game modes, Assault and Onslaught, both of which we are more than happy to report

are sublime, but more on them later. Many people will be happy to note that Epic has done away with the WWE style opening to the game (which apparently everyone apart from myself despised), and instead have opted for a more military reenactment style of approach. The basic premise behind the game remains basically the same but the overall plot revolves around reenactments of some of the great and key battles between the Humans and the Skaarj.

Assault on the senses

The first of the major new game styles is Assault, a progressive objective based team game reminiscent of, well, a lot of things really, from BF 1942 to Counter-Strike. Players are divided into two teams, the assault team and the defence team and charged with either defending or achieving a number of objectives in a set time period. In the case of one of the maps, Convoy, the assault team must first activate a boarding platform so they can access the next part of the level, set some explosives, open the rear doors to call for reinforcements, gain access to the next part of the map, unlock some missiles and eventually steal them, all in 10 minutes – not the easiest task when the opposing team is hell bent on stopping you. After the initial ten minutes

SYSTEM

NEED

PIII 1.0GHz CPU or equivalent
128Mb RAM
16Mb 3D Video Card
3.5Gb HDD

WANT

PIII 1.5GHz CPU or equivalent
256Mb RAM
64Mb 3D Video Card
3.5Gb HDD

MULTIPLAYER

Hell yes

ONLINE

www.epicgames.com
The site for all of your Unreal needs plus some information on their older classics such as Jazz Jackrabbit. If you're interested in game development check out the link to the Make Something Unreal comp – you may have what it takes to win.



(or however long you have the round set to) the roles are reversed thus giving all players the chance to see how the other half lives.

Each of the six maps created specifically for Assault are nicely varied and show a good range of objectives ranging from placing explosives to blow a door to escaping with a tank to piloting a Human starfighter to destroy the shields on a Skaarj mothership. Many of the other

maps can be played in Assault but the objectives are fairly generic and not nearly as frantically fun as the spec built maps.

Although Assault may be a heap of fun it absolutely pales in comparison to Onslaught, a truly superb multiplayer concept that takes elements of capture the flag, domination and king of the hill and crafts them into something far greater than the sum of its parts. Each of the two teams in every game of Onslaught has a home base with a power generator and players must capture a web of power nodes across the map to create an unbroken power line to the enemy base making it vulnerable to attack. If the chain is broken by the enemy team the base once again becomes shielded and invulnerable to damage and players can only capture or attack nodes connected to one they already hold. The premise may be simple but the actual practice is fiendishly difficult and fantastically fun as the two teams vie over key power

nodes and do anything to protect their base. To add some extra oomph to an already potent cocktail, each power node captured spawns a new set of weapons (handily arranged on a hanger so the player grabs all of them in one swoop) and a few vehicles. Tactical depth is also added to the game with the inclusion of a number of seemingly useless power nodes situated far from the main routes to each base and requiring some serious effort to get to. We say they are seemingly useless as these nodes often spawn super weapons or vehicular super weapons such as the incredibly formidable Leviathan tank which may be terribly slow moving but packs a staggering 5000 health as well as the ability to transform into a stationary turret with a gun that fires a laser just as damaging as a Redeemer. Maps range from absolutely enormous with ten or so power nodes scattered around to tiny, with only a single node to fight over.

BOT BUSINESS

Like the previous incarnations of the UT series, UT 2004 contains an entire single player campaign in which the player must make their way through the various ladders to become the ultimate champion of the tournament. Aside from the single player campaign, UT 2004 offers excellent bot support for all game modes, so it is perfectly possible to play a game of Assault or Onslaught all by yourself. The level of intelligence shown by the bots was pleasantly surprising in the levels tested with bots using vehicles to good effect, independently achieving objectives or capturing power nodes and otherwise acting in a tactically sound manner. Amusingly the bots couldn't handle the jumping vehicles mutator too well as some of them would try to bunny-hop across the map.



The overhead map - useful in Onslaught.

Vroom

As seems to be becoming standard in FPS games at the moment, UT 2004 adds a number of vehicles to the game but unlike some other recent additions to the genre (Chrome, I'm looking in your direction) they are well balanced, handle well and possess an excellent physics set. Vehicles range from a simple 4WD called the Scorpion to the aforementioned Leviathan. Balance between the various vehicles is



GRADE A BANG BANG

One of the few disappointments with UT 2004 is the relative lack of new weapons. Sure players have access to three new and remarkably fun weapons as well as one additional super weapon but more would have been appreciated. The three new weapons are a grenade launcher with sticky bombs, anti vehicular missile launcher (AVRIL) that automatically locks on to any aircraft and the Spider Mine Launcher, a weapon that can fire up to eight robotic mines at a time that can either be used to guard an area or can be lead around with the alt-fire to be used as pyrotechnic foot soldiers. The new super weapon (unnamed at the time of review) acts somewhat like the Ion Painter but instead of triggering an Ion Cannon it paints an area for an air-strike, dropping five Redeemers on the surrounding area. Due to the number of complaints they received the developers have also put the old school Sniper Rifle back in the game.

UT or not UT?

It's inevitable that some punters are going to condemn UT 2004 for being too similar to last year's game, for not having a new and even more spectacular graphics engine and being too derivative of other game for adding vehicles but they will be missing the point of the game altogether. It's not a revolution in terms of multiplayer deathmatch gaming but it is certainly an evolution, taking everything we knew and loved about UT and UT 2003 and taking it up a notch, delivering one of the most purely enjoyable exercises in adrenalin to be released in recent memory. Give it a look in and you won't be disappointed. Raven is going to have to pull its finger out if it wants to drag the Quake franchise back to the top of the heap.

Now I'm off to see my chiropractor to correct 40 odd hours of sitting in planes compounded by a few straight days hunched over in a chair pitting my skills against the developers and then I have to visit a doctor to see if I can get some medication for an allergic reaction to something I ate on the plane back that makes my entire tongue feel like I'm licking razor blades. You're lucky we love you.

Daniel Wilks

RATING



FOR

Onslaught
Assault
PANCAKE!

AGAINST

Delayed to 04
Not revolutionary
Not enough new weapons

OVERALL

Once again Epic has shown that they may be a small in size but they're big in ideas. The UT franchise is still going as strong as ever.

90

achieved through a fairly simple rock/paper/scissors manner that works fantastically - ground vehicles are strong against other ground vehicles and infantry but can be destroyed fairly easily by

the formidable Leviathan tank may be slow moving but packs a staggering 5000 health

aircraft which can in turn are vulnerable to stationary turrets and infantry. Much like BF 1942, many of the vehicles have room for more than one occupant or gunner, making them simultaneously more forbidding (especially in the case of the Leviathan and its space for an extra four gunners) and a more appealing form of transport. Like all of the handheld weapons, every one of the vehicles has either a secondary fire or a secondary weapon (itself with secondary fire), many of which are absolutely inspired. A personal favourite vehicle, the Manta, a kind of single person vectored fan hover-vehicle is a perfect example of the developer's inspired approach to vehicular

violence. The primary fire is a fairly mundane rapid fire plasma weapon but the alternate fire would have to rank up there as being one of the most satisfying frags ever perpetrated in a game. Hitting the jump button shoots the Manta into the air for a brief period (which is of course a roundabout way of saying that the vehicle can jump) and the alternate fire does the

exact opposite, causing the vehicle to slam down towards the ground, instantly killing anyone underneath its massive thrust fans. To make it even more appealing, splashing down on an enemy results in the now familiar voice-over intoning, "PANCAKE!" Although only really integral to Onslaught, vehicles can be ported into any of the game modes through use of mutators. What's more, the vehicles themselves come with a few mutators as well, allowing them to jump, alter their speed, weight, maneuverability in the air and lessen the effects of gravity - don't be surprised to see a UT version of the famous Warthog Jump video in the next few months.



Lord of the EverQuest

Is Warcraft's crown under threat?

Developer: Rapid Eye ■ Publisher: Sony Online Entertainment ■ Distributor: Ubi Soft ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: G8+ ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

1Ghz CPU
256Mb RAM
32Mb Videocard
700Mb HDD space

WANT

1.6Ghz+
512Mb RAM
64Mb Videocard

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

ONLINE

www.doesmanner-
ism.com
Coming soon!

Lords of EverQuest takes an online massively multiplayer RPG and hammers it into the form of an RTS game but, surprising, it does it rather well.

Your lord is central to this strange blend. For each army you get a choice of five headliners, from fearsome Troll Shadow Knights to the pure High Elf Enchanter, and the choice is so important that it sets the difficulty of the campaign. This is because your whole army revolves around the progress of this character with every new unit being created at half the level of your mighty lord.

small, and try funnel in as much experience as possible, knowing that the rest of your standing army is neglected and knowing that you're taking big risks with your head honcho?

If you lose your Lord, there's no handy resurrection back at base, oh no, you have to get a relatively fragile unit to the body (like the equipment retrieval runs in EQ) before any dramatic recoveries.

Everquestful

The EQ roots of Lords are also reflected in the structure of the campaign. Generally,

these evil clerics to ground. Things get more interesting because they don't stand still for you to hit them and because they start turning into Dracoliches. That leaves you an unpleasant choice: if you kill all the priests and stop all of the zombies then you have an over whelming number of undead dragons to deal with, but if you only kill the priests one at a time, then you have a long haul of zombie bashing ahead.

To round out the mission roster, naturally enough, there are also missions where you take your lord dungeon crawling RPG-style.

If you are used to other RTS games, some things about the campaign will seem a little odd to you. For one, enemy forces are set – the AI doesn't mine, for example – and the pace is set by limited platinum supplies. You have a set problem and you have set resources to tackle it.

RTS Chops

Tackling problems will generally come down to battle and battle is where things turn heavily RTS. The real-time strategy foundation of this game ranges from very solid to pretty dodgy depending on how you weight these things.

Every unit does a specific type of damage and each has a bunch of resistances, which leads to a complicated Rock, Paper, Scissors dynamic.

enemy AI has a nasty tendency to focus fire on the guys you want to keep around the most

Every single unit you create has a character class in which he or she gains up to 20 levels, opening up new special abilities. Every one of them can use magic items and you can choose to Knight any of two of them opening up another 10 levels plus mighty new class skills.

This leads to the RPG-versus-army dynamic. Do you go large and dominate with as many troops as you can produce or do you keep your central taskforce

you quest from place to place using your lord and selected entourage while using rank and file to defend your base.

That's not to say that the missions are all the same: you have your usual mix of base defence, hostage rescue and seek-and-destroy but there are also interesting set pieces. One of them has clerics running around the outside of the map raising dead like it's a contest. You have to mount a relentless base defence while running



Furthermore, the three armies in the game are varied and balanced, but *Lords* does a bad job of filling you in on the details... the "verbose" tool tips just don't cut it. The Shadow Realm is high on damage, low on hit points and has very fragile towers and ranged units. The Dawn Brotherhood is the defensive king but lacks any air units and the Eldar Alliance relies on its tough archers, entanglement and healing bonuses.

If your army doesn't have a unit that you need, you can always capture enemy buildings and borrow some of theirs, which expands your options greatly.

The controls are just as complete as the unit options and they include waypoints, patrol paths and being able to give orders like "move here and then use this special ability".

When it comes to computer control, the

KNIGHT SHIFT

To further enhance the character advancement part of the game, you can Knight any two units, creating powerful heroes with special auras. One of the big benefits of the Knights is that, in the campaign, they come along with you for free, without the usual transfer fee for moving units between maps. This adds a huge amount of flexibility to the game. Do you knight someone early on so they keep pace with the lord or do you wait until later and knight a more powerful unit? Finally, it allows you to choose heroes that complement your wider strategy. In one campaign, I knighted a Mud Element (a siege weapon) to protect my archer lord with his large, spongy, body.



An unplayable view, but fun to watch.

LORDS OF THE LAN

Lords comes with a hefty multiplayer component, with a bunch of game types including your usual last man standing/last unit standing as well as deadly races to see who can level their lord the fastest or mine the most platinum. The games can be played over the LAN or on Sony's special (and free) game servers, which take a leaf out of Blizzard's Battle.net. Everything seems pretty stable here and multiplayer is really worth trying. Interestingly enough, if you want to skirmish on your own, you have to create a multiplayer game and set the opponents to be computer controlled.

polish of Blizzard's golden boy. The storytelling can't match the lavish cut-scene movies, the graphics aren't as clean and the music isn't quite as epic, the game's AI isn't as refined, the load times are longer, the armies aren't as obviously unique, and veterans will find the campaign here easier if they want to bull through it.

All of that sounds damning, but none of it really matters because there's a lot of room under WCH's lofty bar to play around in. *Lords* looks great, Ron Perlman does some great voice acting, the campaign offers some interesting twists, there's plenty of new strategy dynamics (if you think beyond mass Cleric rushes), multiplayer games are a blast, and the unit experience system in this buries all competition. Fans of *EverQuest* lore, as well as suckers for character development, will find something a little special in *Lords of EverQuest*.

Timothy C. Best

enemy AI isn't too shabby and seems to have a nasty tendency to focus fire on the guys you want to keep around the most.

The friendly AI, on the other hand, will let your archers stand in hand-to-hand and get cut to pieces, it occasionally leaves units watching a fight, it won't shuffle your troops to let people through (which means units will often run into a mess of trouble just trying to get to the right place) and it plays fast and loose with the "Hold" command so you have to keep an eye out for your defenders charging away.

Some of this is just plain lazy (like the Hold command), but most of this comes down to making players really work if they want to get level 20 Enchanters and if you keep an eye on the action none of this is too dire.

Crafting a Different War

Something that might frustrate hardcore RTS aficionados is the amount of time it takes to create units, with your basic grunts taking about 20 seconds in the oven a piece. Since each building handles only one or two units this encourages mixed forces and also stops people from power-leveiling their lord and then flooding the screen with high-level troops.

It has to be said: this game isn't *WarCraft III*. It just can't match the

RATING



FOR

Character development
RPG flavour
EverQuest Appeal

AGAINST

Scant Unit description
Load times
Finicky AI

OVERALL

A pretty RTS soaked in RPG elements

82

Magic: The Gathering Battlegrounds

Can you say... nerd?

Developer: Secret Level ■ Publisher: Atari ■ Distributor: Atari ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: G8+ ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

P3-800
128MB RAM
64MB Videocard
1.4GB HDD

WANT

Athlon-1500+
256MB RAM
GeForceFX
1.4GB HDD

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

ONLINE

<http://www.angelire.com/ga/elt/magiclang.html>

Don't know your Power Nine's from your Fat Moti's? Then go here and bone up on your M:TG slang

I'm going to come right out and confess that I'm a big fan of Magic: The Gathering. I've been playing the card game for around eight years now (that's since Revised Edition, for those of you in the know) and I've played every digital iteration of the phenomenon released thus far – from the very first Microprose game to the recently released online version. Given this experience, I think it's pretty reasonable to assume that I "know" Magic... that I'm something of a "Magic aficionado". And you know what? M:TG Battlegrounds ain't Magic. No sir, not even close.

Incidentally, it's also not a very good game either. Developer Secret Level has basically removed everything that makes Magic an enjoyable pastime and replaced it with a tedious, repetitive and frustrating keyboard-basher that lacks any kind of depth or longevity at all. The good thing about Magic, right, is that you can build your own decks and use combinations of the cards therein to compose effective strategies and play-



a tedious, repetitive keyboard-basher that lacks any kind of depth or longevity

styles. It's all about control, basically: YOU decide what cards your deck will have and YOU decide when and how to use them in play. Battlegrounds doesn't give you any of that at all.

Player autonomy is restricted to building tiny decks out of the useless cards the game deigns you worthy of possessing. Actual duelling consists of two wizards standing on a flat field, collecting "mana-crystals" and casting spells – usually creature summons and sorceries. Players have no control over their creatures beyond bringing them into play.

Summon a Goblin King creature and it'll run off and attack whatever it wants to regardless of your screaming pleas to the contrary. No control at all. The same goes for sorceries and enchantments. If you want to cast an Engulfing Flames, it'll simply hit the closest creature or wizard. There's no opportunity to target it, no chance to use it strategically... no means to do anything that would make you think you're the one actually calling the shots.

This almost insulting simplicity and lack of control results in an experience

where you press a lot of keys really quickly and hope that whatever you've cast actually does what you hope it will. On most occasions it doesn't, and so a good deal of your time in Battlegrounds will be spent swearing at your monitor. It's amazing how good the f-word can sound when it's appended to the phrase "crap game". And since you'll probably want to turn the awful sound effects and music off, you'll get to hear every expletive you mutter with crystal clarity. At least then it'll be possible to concentrate on one of the few redeeming feature this title has going for it: the reasonably impressive graphics. Look at the snazzy dragons!

Battlegrounds is a game that'll appeal to very few people – if any at all. Magic fans will hate it for its sacrilegious treatment of the card game they love and the "average" gamer will find nothing interesting about its repetitious and often extremely irritating gameplay. What a terrible waste of a perfectly good license.

Daniel Staines

RATING



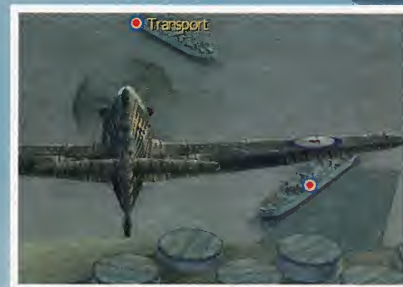
OVERALL

An awful game and a wasted license

35

HAPPY BIRTHDAY

For the two or three of you interested, Magic the card game had its 10th birthday this year. Apparently, there was a huge cake at the party and plenty of free booze. The latter probably explains why that Llanowar Elf and his Dirkwood Boar reportedly behaved in a way that could only be described as disturbingly obscene. Oh, and a word of advice for anyone thinking of holding a similar function in the near future: don't EVER ask a Shivan Dragon to light your cigarette for you. EVER. Unless, of course, you've got a bucket of ice water and fire-blanket handy.



Damn, we need more 'reflex time'...

Secret Weapons Over Normandy

A new classic, or just revisionist history?

Developer: Totally Games ■ Publisher: LucasArts ■ Distributor: EA ■ Price: \$79.95 ■ Rating: G8+ ■ Available: Now

So, you're flush with Chrissy cash from old relatives and now you want to splash out on a WW2 air combat simulator. But wait, you're not down with all that ultra-realism stuff. You don't want to know about turncocks and attitude bars, you just want to jump in and shoot a bunch of Nazis out of the sky.

At first glance, *Secret Weapons Over Normandy* might appear to be the game for you. It carries a proud heritage, it's been released on PS2 and Xbox too so you know it's going to be light and fluffy, and it includes a whole bunch of semi-historical planes in the form of experimental machines that never saw active service in the war.

Not Shiny

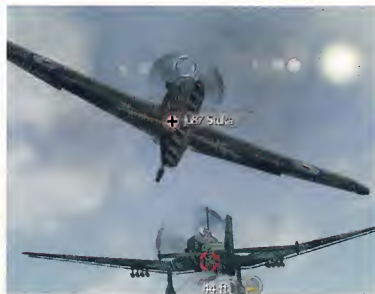
Sadly though, *SWON* is a rather average arcade shooter with lacklustre graphics and many niggling gameplay problems.



The premise is sound enough - you're a US airman assigned to an RAF squadron to help out with the retreat from Dunkirk. After proving yourself, you're assigned to the Battlehawks, an elite secret squadron tasked with shutting down Hitler's secret weapons in all theatres of the war.

THE LEGACY

If you've already had a look at the back of the box at your local EB, you'll have seen the "From Lawrence Holland Legendary Creator of Secret Weapons of the Luftwaffe and the X-Wing series!" sticker. And true, both these games were top-notch titles back in the days of 2MB video cards and the mighty 386. Which is why it's all the more disappointing to get such an unremarkable game from this great stable. Even with all the wonders of modern 3D technology, Holland couldn't make a game even half as good as his previous efforts. I smell the heady perfume of quick bucks.



Thus is the stage set for the player to bounce from theatre to theatre and fly everything from the redoubtable Spitfire to the crazy US Flying Pancake. On the way you'll jump into the cockpit of such favourites as the Hawker Hurricane, the Mosquito, the good ol' Sturmovik and even such post-war planes as the Gloster Meteor and the Messerschmitt 262 jet fighter.

Naturally, with so many planes in the game you're unlikely to experience

particularly realistic flight models for each, so the differences are distilled down to acceleration and climb rates, and different armour levels.

Off you go into the wild blue yonder, shooting at gaudily labelled enemies and occasionally using the Max Payne flavoured "reflex time" to slow down the action to allow you to get a few more kills in on each pass.

Box Kites Over Blahville

There's nothing essentially wrong with an arcade-style WW2 shooter, but *SWON*'s presentation just totally fails to impress. There's a story of sorts, but rather than living 'in the moment', events are unveiled to the player via a hokey historical newsreel - hardly engaging stuff. There are characters in the game, but they're fairly clichéd and don't really add anything to the atmosphere of "shove in another \$2 and let's get blasting".

Adding insult to injury, the system requirements for the game are surprisingly steep given the fact that the graphics look distinctly 'last season' - planes are not particularly detailed, ground textures are bland and explosions are little short of pathetic. And yet, this game demands a titanic 2GB of your hard drive.

It's fairly clear that the LucasArts team responsible for *SWON* were tasked with getting a game out before Christmas for three different platforms, and once again PC got the least amount of attention when it came to performance tweaking, optimisation and upgrading of visuals to take advantage of our superior video cards.

In the end we're left with a game that has Xbox graphics, requires a beefy PC and fails to impress on almost every level. Better luck next time guys.

Anthony Fordham

SYSTEM

NEED

P3-850
256MB RAM
32MB Video card
2GB HDD

WANT

P4-2GHz+
512MB RAM
64MB Video card
2.2GB HDD

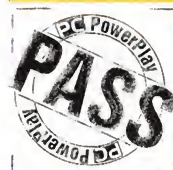
MULTIPLAYER

No

ONLINE

www.lucasarts.com
What? You didn't know the Nazis had interstellar spaceships at the end of WW2? Hie you to this site then.

RATING



OVERALL

Can anyone say "oh stuff it we might as well do a PC version"?

59



X2: The Threat

It's like Freelancer with OCD

Developer: Egosoft ■ Publisher: QV ■ Distributor: QV Software ■ Price: \$79.95 ■ Rating: G8+ ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

P4-800MHz
128MB RAM
32MB Video card
800MB HDD

WANT

P4-3GHz
1GB RAM
Radeon 9800
1GB HDD

MULTIPLAYER

No

ONLINE

www.x2au.com
A dedicated X2
fansite built by one
of our very own
PCPP forum regular.
Go son!

RATING



OVERALL

The polar opposite of
Freelancer, and that's
not necessarily a
good thing

66

Oh dear. I really shouldn't have read the thread on the PCPP forums about X2. The worst part was the guy who was looking forward to me reviewing this game because I would undoubtedly give it a "gold award or high distinction".

X2 is one of those games that polarises the community. I feel confident in saying that there is no one out there who says "oh yeah, X2, I played it. It was okay." You will either love this game like your own child, or hate it with the heat of a thousand suns.

Trader X

X2 is what Freelancer promised to be. A freeform, massively detailed space trading game where the player doesn't just fly around in a single fighter but can actually own massive commercial or military empires and dominate the universe with fleets of dozens of ships.

Sounds pretty damn good huh? Slow up there though tiger, there's a big caveat. The trackless gulf between X2's simulated universe and the way it presents that universe to the player is so massive that the vast majority of players

UGLY BASTARD

The biggest bone of contention about X2 on the PCPP forums seems to be whether or not the game is a thing of beauty or, in the words of Grandpa Simpson, homely as a mule's butt. Certainly, the cutscenes are truly terrible - creepy zombie people stand stiffly in front of a faux-documentary wobbly camera waffling on about the plot. The fact you'll need a seriously beefy machine to handle this game is all the more infuriating when the visual results are so... ambiguous.



risk being turned off in the first two hours of play.

This is not Freelancer. There is no slick, fast interface. There are no streamlined navigation systems or interface simplifications in the name of gameplay. X2 is big, top-heavy, difficult to learn and at times tedious to play. If you like submarine simulators you're on familiar ground but if not - watch out.

For some unfathomable reason the creators of X2 thought it would be a good idea to have the player interact with the game exclusively from the cockpit of their ship. A quick click of the right mouse button brings up a menu system so arcane and convoluted your mere mortal brain will melt. Endless recursive menu options later and you've figured out how to buy a docking computer for your ship. In the process you've scrolled past trading systems, navigation systems, satellite deployment systems, ship commands, station commands and 'best buy' commodity search systems. At this point your brain will be hurting.

Rogue Trader

Put it this way - if you have anything else in your life that demands your attention, be it partner, child, nagging rash, dodgy pyramid scheme or hungry pet, X2 will be too much game for you.



at this point your brain will be hurting

On the other hand, if you have the hours and hours needed, X2 is incredibly rich and rewarding. Like I've already said - it's not Freelancer. There's a real universe out there. You can indeed own multiple ships and send them on errands of their own, or order them to fly escort on your great lumbering freighter. You can hide in an asteroid while managing illegal drug factories half a galaxy away. You can abandon the fairly laughable plot and spend your time amassing an armada to take on the pirate base that made your life such a misery in the early missions (PCPP forums regulars will recognise these experiences - thanks for the anecdotes guys!).

But the bottom line is if you don't have a serious amount of time to invest in X2, you won't get much out of the game. And in the limited space I have for this review, that's about the most important piece of commentary I can give.

Anthony Fordham



Railroad Tycoon 3

Is it dawn already?

Developer: Pop Top ■ Publisher: Gathering ■ Distributor: Take 2 ■ Price: \$79.95 ■ Rating: G ■ Available: Now

The editorial team at PCPP got this review late. Very late. That's because I kept having to play just one more scenario to check some niggling detail of the game and when I next looked around it was three in the morning.

Railroad Tycoon 3 is one of those kind of games - more addictive than nicotine and smoother on the palate than a pack of Laramies. Like the previous games in the series, your task is to take control of a railroad company and make a bazillion dollars in the old money. It evokes a lost age where being a money-mad capitalist exploitation machine was a good and noble pursuit.

3D Capitalism

If you're familiar with Railroad Tycoon 2 you won't find too much new stuff in RT3. There's a spiffy 3D engine which does the job but can't compete with Auran's TRS2004, a whole bunch of new kind of industries to invest in, and new locomotives.

For those unfamiliar with this old and respected gaming franchise, here's the skinny. Railroad Tycoon 3 is a realtime economic management game where you have to spend money to make money. You spend money on railroads, laying track across the scenario map to connect cities and industrial centres. You can then create train routes and buy 'consists' - trains - to run them. The trains carry goods and passengers from station to station and generate cash.

On the back of the railroad sim rides a simplified economy - twenty or so different industries combine to create a constantly fluctuating market. Newspapers keep you up to date on the state of the economy and your board of directors play the hanging judge, rating your performance at the end of each game year.

RT3 is basically a juggling game. You need to juggle expenditure versus profit. Too much expenditure and you'll get the arse from the board. Too little, and profits won't grow enough in the year and once again you'll get the arse from the board. Do well though and they'll increase your salary and pay you a bonus - money you need to play the stockmarket and by bigger and bigger stakes in your competition.

Sweet statistics

The genius of RT3 - and something the developers of X2: The Threat could learn - is in its information management. The game could have overwhelmed the player with data, but instead all the niggling info is buried at the bottom of menus while the essential stuff is positioned at the top. By the end of most scenarios you will have upwards of 100 trains running across the map, but you won't have to micromanage any of them. Just sit back and watch the dollars roll in.

RT3 has the leanness of a board game, and is broken into different scenarios, each of which takes about three hours to complete. However, you typically win the scenario just as your company hits the big time so you'll want to play on and buy out your competition and lay out a few thousand more miles of track.

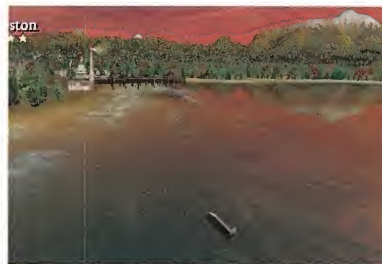
Of course there are niggles. For a

start, the game covers the broad sweep of railroading history, but the in-game newspapers and cutscenes are always 1850's style. You can be building bullet-trains on the dikes of a 21st Century Holland, but the winning movie clip will still show a fat guy in a top hat standing on a caboose hung with union bunting.

Also, there's a day-night cycle on the 3D map that seems to run bizarrely off kilter to the game clock - there's roughly one night every two years. The night just makes the map hard to see, rather than adding anything to the game.

But in the end this is an addictive, well designed management sim with train-tastic flavour. If you want to play with model trains, stick with TRS2004, but if you want to make \$10million in three hours, RT3 is for you.

Anthony Fordham



SYSTEM

NEED

P3-667
128MB RAM
32MB Video card
1.2GB HDD

WANT

P4-1GHz+
512MB RAM
GeForce4
1.2GB HDD

MULTIPLAYER

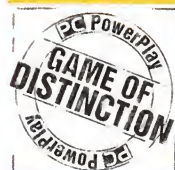
No

ONLINE

www.hornbyrailways.com

Enough with these digital pretenders - the only real way to play with trains is to PLAY with TRAINS. And Hornby trains are the best.

RATING



OVERALL

If you're not still playing at 1am, you're not playing properly

77



Battlecruiser Millennium Gold

In space no one can hear you snore

Developer: 3000AD ■ Publisher: Dreamcatcher ■ Distributor: QV Software ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: M 15+ ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

PII 300MHz CPU or equivalent
64Mb RAM
16Mb 3D Video Card
500Mb HDD

WANT

PII 300MHz CPU or equivalent
64Mb RAM
16Mb 3D Video Card
500Mb HDD

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

ONLINE

www.3000ad.com
A word of warning though, don't say anything bad about the game on the forums or Derek Smart will flame you.

RATING



OVERALL

BCM isn't a game you can really either praise or pan - it does what it sets out to do.

55

For years gamers have been questing for a title that was truly open ended, allowing them to do what they want when they want to do it. Witness the success of Morrowind, Vice City or Elite. Essentially all of these games gave the player a framework to play around and left the rest up to them. They could follow the plot in Morrowind or Vice City or simply go off and explore at their own pace. Even though it is a great deal older Elite still defines open ended gameplay - players could trade, explore and fight their way through a massive universe totally at their own pace. Derek Smart's newest attempt at an opus tries to take a similar route but goes one step further by adding a number of different game styles including tactical starship combat, space fighter combat, ground vehicles and even first person elements. To facilitate these combined game styles and allow players to tailor the experience to meet their individual needs the game contains 13 different careers and races to choose from. Unfortunately whilst putting together this admittedly massive retinue of

gaming styles, Derek Smart forgot to add one little feature - a point.

The Universe is Empty, A Derek Smart Game

It's all well and good to present players with a game that gives them nearly unlimited scope for exploration but players have to have some impetus to want to explore in the first place. This is the ultimate flaw of Battlecruiser Millennium - there is little in the game that could attract all but the most fanatical of space sim gamers to play the title. This problem stems from two factors, time and space, both of which are ultimately indivisible. To get from one place to another takes a long time but there is usually enough to do to keep your attention for the duration. The real problem comes in when you get to your destination. Say you've flown half way across the galaxy to get to a space station for some trading - you'd expect something rewarding when you get there such as a little FMV, a written history of the station or anything else that could

conceivably give that corner of space a little flavour. All you actually get is a simple screen detailing what is for sale. That may be bad but it's not as dull as exploring new planets. You get to a planet after an interminable period of travel, beam down and discover nothing but flat swathes of land and a few rocks. If that doesn't spell excitement I don't know what does.

It's a pity that the content of the game is so lacking because the frame it's strung around is really quite strong. Although the control scheme is very difficult to get your head around and the tutorials and manual are close acquaintances with useless, once you get the hang of them, piloting is a very deep experience. You may have noticed in the need and want sections at the side of the review that BCM only needs 500Mb of HDD space. This may sound ridiculously small for something so epic but you need only to have a look at the screens to see that the graphics engine ain't taking up too much space.

Daniel Wilks

WHAT WAS I DOING AGAIN?

BCM contains two main game modes, Roam and Campaign. Roam essentially allows the player to make a character and do whatever they like from exploring to trading to combat without and enforced structure. If the idea of doing your own thing doesn't really appeal, BCM does contain over 50 missions for the player to undertake as well as a number of instant action scenarios that give the player to drop right into the middle of the action without the necessity of hours of travel.





Judge Dredd Dredd vs Death

Bennett Ring is the law.

Developer: Rebellion ■ Publisher: Sierra ■ Distributor: Vivendi Universal Games ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: M15+ ■ Available: Now

D rokk! That's the only word that springs to mind after playing the mess that is Judge Dredd: Dredd versus Death. If you're not a fan of the 2001AD comics that Dredd originally appeared in, you probably don't know the meaning of this word; let's just say that it'd be the kind of word you'd use after spending the night with a hottie, only to later find out that the hottie is actually your long lost sister. How could Rebellion, a company with the likes of the respectable Alien versus Predator series under its belt, manage to screw up a game that had such a deep pool of cool background material to draw upon?

The premise for the game is a worthy one. You get to fill the gold, sparkly boots of Judge Dredd, the toughest badass this side of the year 2150, and the brown stuff has hit the spinning thing with the release of the Dark Judges; Death, Fear, Mortis and Fire. These guys are the definition of evil; originating from an alternate reality, Judge Death realised that all crime originated from living people, and jumped to the only logical conclusion that a psychopath could,

some of the worst ragdoll physics we've had the displeasure of tolerating

outlawing life. Told you he was bad. It's your job to track him and his cronies down and give them a royal sized serving of MegaCity justice.

Visually, the game initially looks quite impressive. The first cut-scene shows off the epic scale of the levels, capturing the massive cityscape of MegaCity 1 perfectly. But as soon as the game proper begins, and the camera zooms into player level, you'll soon realise that these are some of the blandest levels seen since Rise of the Triad. Whether you're inside or out, there is very little in the way of

space fillers; a couple of crates is about it. And the character models don't look much better. Throw in some of the worst ragdoll physics we've ever had the displeasure of tolerating, and you'll soon wonder how the devs managed to make a game look so bloody, well, boring.

This would be forgivable if the gameplay was even moderately inspiring, but after you've gotten over the amusement of seeing Dredd references sprinkled throughout the game, you'll soon realise that it doesn't get much more snooze inducing than this. Walk from A to B, killing idiotic, generic enemies along the way, watch a mildly entertaining cut scene, and then do it all again. And again. And again. Every level is very linear, and each and every one revolves around clearing out all the bad guys. Repetition, thy name is Judge Dredd. The only slightly interesting part of the game is the ability to arrest crims, but this soon devolves into yet another tedious element, as it always plays out the same way; if they surrender you cuff 'em, if they don't you cap 'em.

I've been a fan of Judge Dredd since I was knee high to his Lawmaster, and even thought the Stallone film was passable. And if I loathed this game, I hate to think what non Dredd fans will think of it. Sorry Rebellion, but Judge Dredd: Dredd versus Death has been sentenced to life in the Isocubes, for unforgivable crimes against gamerkind.

Bennett Ring



SYSTEM

NEED

700MHz CPU
128MB RAM
32MB DX9 compatible card with Hardware T&L support
DX9 compatible sound card
1.5GB hard drive space

WANT

1.8GHz CPU
512MB RAM
GeForce 4 or better

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

ONLINE

www.2001ADonline.com is the place to go for all your official Judge Dredd needs.

RATING



OVERALL

It pains us to imagine how good this game could have been...

37

Terminator 3 War of the Machines

Cyborgs don't feel pain, I do.

Developer: Clevers ■ Publisher: Atari ■ Distributor: Atari ■ Price: Your remaining faith in license games ■ Rating: M 15+ ■ Available: Unfortunately

SYSTEM

NEED

Anything but this game

WANT

Your money back

MULTIPLAYER

Yes, if you can find someone else who has it.

ONLINE

www.weloveamold.com
From the people who brought you www.weloveheraquinformationminister.com comes a collection of quotes by the Governor as well as some brilliant satire.

RATING



OVERALL

As Shaun Micallef would say - Into the Bin!

20

Starting a review with a personal anecdote is usually a bit of a no-no but sometimes it's unavoidable. About a year and a half ago a company threatened to sue me for using a couple of made up words to describe their product. Those words were "skanktastic" and "craptacular". The company in question eventually withdrew their threat of litigation and things ended there. I'm going to risk another lawsuit right now by stating plainly and for the record that Terminator 3: War of the Machines is both skanktastic and craptacular, managing the seemingly impossible task of having no visible redeeming features - hell, even CTU Marine Sharpshooter allowed you the brief satisfaction of being able to kill your retarded spotter.

Leverage

Take the general concept of Battlefield 1942, remove all of the fun bits and leverage it into the Terminator mythos and you'll have yourself an accurate idea of what Terminator 3 is. Both the single



and multiplayer are essentially the same, with players taking the role of a member of either the human or robot teams, each bent on destroying the other. To achieve this, the teams must capture various points across the large maps. That's it. Battlefield 1942 succeeded using this design by having well balances teams, great vehicles and brilliantly designed maps. Although T3 does contain a number of vehicles for the human side and the ability to play as hunter-killers for the Skynet side, the teams are terribly balanced and the maps are nothing short of atrociously designed. There is no balance. Capture and spawn points are situated too close together, thus heavily weighting one side or the other. The human side has access to all of the weapons that the machines do - as well as grenades - and move far faster to boot, making it little more than a futile exercise in circle strafing technique.

You're luggage

Unfortunately the screenshots are a bit of a lie, as they do not show the single most annoying bit about the game. When you imagine a terminator you probably think of an Arnie-esque behemoth (or ice-cold Robert Patrick), nigh unstoppable, improbably destructive, gifted with



incredible senses and able to pick targets no matter where they hide. This is not what you get when you choose to play on the Skynet side (or the human side Arnie terminator) in T3. Instead you wind up as remarkably soft (dead in a few shots), slow (it takes a couple of minutes to go a distance human can cover in 30 seconds) and horrendously inaccurate. None of this is as annoying as the red filter that is put on the screen whilst playing a terminator. It looks as though the developers were aiming for a thermal type view but forgot about that whole heat signature thing. Everything is simply a shade of red, making it nearly impossible to see anything at all, though you might be thankful of this fact as you won't be subjected to too much detail of the rape of a great series of movies.

Daniel Wilks



Need For Speed Underground

Another holiday season, another NFS game

Developer: EA ■ Publisher: EA ■ Distributor: EA ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: G ■ Available: Now

It's kind of surprising that this is an NFS-branded title rather than a 2Fast 2Furious game, since the central premise is exactly what both the Fast 'n' Furious movies were all about - you are an idle rich kid who spends daddy's money upgrading ridiculously overpowered imported sports cars and racing them illegally at night through the city.

First up, if you have anything against night tracks, don't go anywhere near NFS:U. All the tracks are driven at night, and there are no weather variations. That said, the trackside detail has been cranked up a notch, perhaps to compensate for the lack of variety, and the NFS trademark shortcuts abound.

Ripped my face off

Of course, this kind of racing is all about speed rather than any real skill, and Underground delivers amply. You'll need a beefy PC to maintain a smooth framerate at 150mph, but with the right hardware you'll all but feel the skin peeling off your face from the g-forces. Also, the famous NOS makes an appearance - although it's rarely

you too can have a metallic lime-green Skyline with red tint windows and groovy graffiti decals

necessary to win circuit and sprint races (drag is another story, but more on that later) - and on activation the entire scene blurs as you streak toward escape velocity. Bizarrely enough the 'extreme speed blurring' occurs even if you blow your NOS at 40mph in second gear, but hey, it's all in fun.

Most of the race modes are fairly traditional - circuits, sprints, knockouts and time trial - but Underground adds a couple of new modes. Drift puts you inside a modified car park or on a special drift track and your task is to keep your car sliding at 90 degrees for as long as possible, earning points. Drag, on the other hand, is probably the most fun you'll have with the whole game.

Automatic transsexual

You start at one end of a long straight and

your task is to simply get to the other end as fast as possible. Interestingly, automatic transmission is not available in this mode and rather than steer you have to concentrate on making your shifts at just the right moment - the game helps by turning your rev needle green, prompting you to hit the shift up button. A short shift or an over rev can mean the difference between victory and fourth place. Also, unlike in the other modes, it's possible to total your car in Drag, especially on those Drag tracks that have traffic. Finally, use of NOS is critical to victory in Drag mode - blow it too early and they'll chew you up at the far end, leave it too late and you'll be too far behind to catch up.

Tweakage

Underground also sets itself apart by allowing the player to customise their ride. Dozens of different visual upgrades mean you too can have a metallic lime-green Skyline with red tint windows, yellow rims, groovy graffiti decals and a pulsing grape neon under the chassis.

It's not all brilliance though - with customised cars, this game is the first racer I've ever played where I was actually keen to see a replay of my street antics. Yet, bizarrely, there's no replay mode. Also, the endless night can get tiring, and the AI of your opponents is pretty rudimentary.

Still, Underground definitely revitalised the NFS franchise. It's a lot of fun. And it's fast.

Anthony Fordham

SYSTEM

NEED

P3-1GHz
128MB RAM
64MB Videocard
1GB HDD

WANT

P4-2GHz+
512MB RAM
Radeon 9800
1GB HDD

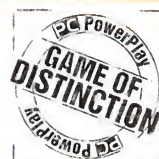
MULTIPLAYER

Yes

ONLINE

Oh dear!
The Internet's down again...

RATING



OVERALL

Fun, frothy racing
for all speed-heads

76

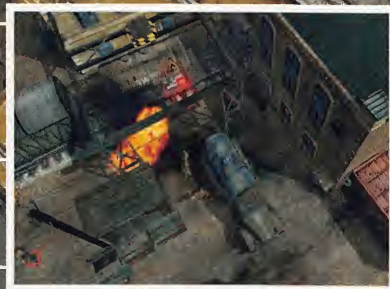
RACING MUSIC

I almost had to give NFS: Underground a really low score because about five minutes into my first race I realised I was listening to a Rob Zombie track - and enjoying it! The music the EA team has managed to pull together for the game is hardly Top 10 material but it's made by 'real' artists and is appropriate for the central premise of the game, that being illegal street racing. Angry music encourages the player to drive angry, which is pretty much the only way to win. Rock on!



Korea Forgotten Conflict

Once again we are reminded that war is hell



Developer: Plastic Reality ■ Publisher: Cenega ■ Distributor: Take 2 ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: M 15+ ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

PIII 733MHz or
equivalent CPU
256Mb RAM
64Mb 3D Video Card
1Gb HDD

WANT

Commandos 3

MULTIPLAYER

No

ONLINE

www.playmash.com
Hang on... this isn't
the M*A*S*H we
remember!

To give credit where credit is due, kudos to developers Plastic Reality for going out on a limb and setting a real-world war game in a war other than WWII or the new flavour of the month, Vietnam. Although M.A.S.H. would have us believe that Korea was a lengthy and relatively bloodless war, Korea in reality was a remarkably short (three year) war with a massive death toll. Historical inaccuracies of aging sitcoms aside, Korea has the potential to be a great setting for a game and any developer worried that Plastic Reality have made the definitive Korean War game can rest easy - Korea: Forgotten Conflict is nothing more than a fairly poor Commandos rip-off that does little or nothing with the setting. Players are given a number of specialist troops ranging from a Korean agent to a medic a demolitions expert and sniper and are forced to make their way through a number of huge but dull levels with varying objectives. Although the characters may seem to be fairly generic, you can't go using them as cannon fodder, as losing a single character means game over.

Casualties of war

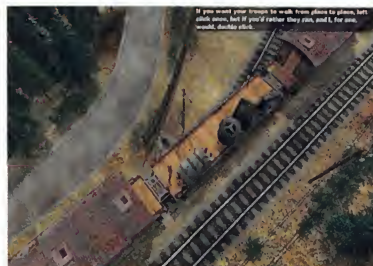
Aside from the generic nature of the setting, the real problem with Korea: Forgotten Conflict is twofold - poor level design exacerbated by an absolutely amazing number of bugs. The problems with the level design are apparent from the first training level in which the player is required to make their way up a train avoiding guards and generally acting the sneak. There is only one path up the train making it a painfully linear experience but the real problem comes from the fact that the single route is not apparent. There is a massive area of well covered flat ground to the right of the train but if you try to go there you are politely told



that the character is unable to comply or more infuriatingly that he does not possess the skill required to perform such a task. These invisible walls are omnipresent through the levels locking the player into a very tight area and making the game more of an essay on testing the limits than anything particularly fun. To make matters worse the game is incredibly bug ridden. Aside from crashing randomly, Korea displays such interesting bugs as characters heads sticking through the roofs of buildings making them visible to anyone outside, the sound turning on and off at intermittent periods and enemy AI that ranges from being about as smart as a subnormal house plant to omniscient, allowing them to see you through the backs of their heads and through a couple of intervening obstacles. If you do end up playing Korea, save early and save often.

VROOM

Some of the missions in Korea: Forgotten Conflict feature vehicles that the player can commandeer to make their way around the level faster. Although the novelty of gadding about in a well rendered vehicle is a welcome respite from painstakingly crawling around everywhere, the charm quickly wears off when you realize that all of the vehicles are essentially the same only with different skins. Ultimately a jeep handles just the same as a tank. Whilst this would be much more of a flaw if Korea was a driving game, the fact that you can maneuver all vehicles in the same manner means that the tactical depth of different vehicles is completely lost.



It's a pity that the gameplay and overall coding is so poor because Plastic Reality have done an excellent job with the graphics engine providing some beautiful pre-rendered backgrounds and animations. The soundtrack on the other hand is on par with the rest of the game with dull predictable music, flat weapon effects (when you can actually hear them) and the hammiest voice acting outside of a 50's sci-fi film.

Daniel Wilks

RATING



OVERALL

Replay the Commandos series rather than getting Korea: Forgotten Conflict.

40

The Entente Battlefields WWI

A new Lord of the Rings strategy game with giant trees? Oh, it's French, you say...

Developer: Lesta ■ Publisher: Buka ■ Distributor: Buka ■ Price: \$49.95 ■ Rating: G8+ ■ Available: Now

You don't really expect too much polish from hardcore war games; in fact, rough edges might even score you bonus points. Based on this, and the looks of *The Entente*, I was set for some pretty serious action with lots of accurate stats, meticulous strategies and Wilfred Owen poems.

It didn't quite deliver. The lack of sheen didn't conceal a brilliantly complex war-sim; it announced the fact that the game is an olden-days RTS for an olden-days war. The graphics are isometric, there is no zoom function, and you can't set waypoints, patrol routes or queue actions. You can see how many hit-points your troops have, but you can't check any of their other stats. If you want to know about relative unit strengths you have to check the manual and even then there aren't any solid numbers for boring details like range, attack strength or defence.

Where most developers have realised that one or two resources present the same tactical options as three or four – while being easier to manage – *The Entente* goes back to the school of “more is better” and has five. You also have jerky scrolling, the bug that doesn't let you complete the first tutorial and the graphic faults. All of this can be forgiven in the name of battlefield strategy and AI. Unfortunately, neither element is strong enough to overwhelm the dated features.

One of the biggest problems is that cannon fodder is pretty much useless. Units like Cavalry can ride straight through your meat-shields and kill off expensive units like Artillery or Mortars before you can do anything about it. This tends to reduce the game to endless rushes or tech races for tanks and planes. This might represent WWI tactics accurately but it doesn't make for a great game.

While you can group units together –

and Officers give everyone in their group a bonus which is neat – the troops, especially infantry, are so disposable that you are constantly re-assigning groups. You might as well just lasso guys when you need to position them.

The scenarios are taken from historical events and are fairly well documented, if you don't mind the broken English. The actual levels present different objectives but generally they fall apart because the AI just seems to want to kill your bases even if that isn't the point. If you were hoping for friendly AI, forget it. Your troops don't panic, rout or do any of that real-war nonsense.

To be fair, *The Entente* isn't all bad. The WWI feel is pretty well captured, and even the music is so crappy that it could be coming from a heavily scratched gramophone.

There are plenty of units (including air and sea), plenty of missions, and a

your troops don't panic, rout or do any of that real-war nonsense

WORLD WAR I TACTICS

Back in the good old days generals liked to command big blocks of troops, like they did in Napoleon's time. Even with machine guns and explosives it took almost until the end of the war for people to realise that smaller groups of men with diversified weapons were the ticket. The English and the French even had to steal the German's manuals on tactics to get clued in. World War I, when men were men and everyone was cannon fodder.

developed infrastructure side that yields heaps of upgrades. The scale of the game is excellent: you can have thousands of guys per side, there are huge battleships, and tanks are massively powerful juggernauts that cost more than a 150 Cavalry units and take several minutes of real time to build. This alone gives it a different feel to most RTS games.

Unfortunately, without panicking troops it doesn't quite feel like a World War and without all the command options it doesn't quite feel like a complete RTS either.

Timothy C. Best

SYSTEM

NEED

266Mhz CPU
128Mb RAM
4Mb Videocard
500Mb HDD space

WANT

600Mhz+
256Mb RAM
32Mb Videocard

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

ONLINE

www.wilfredowen.association.mcmill.com/

This is a site dedicated to Wilfred Owen, probably the most famous WWI war poet to ever wax lyrical about a gas attack.

RATING



OVERALL

WWI action that's years too late.

51



Lounging poolside as the cash rolls in...

Vega\$: Make it big

Sadly not Sigfried & Roy endorsed

Developer: Deep Red ■ Publisher: Empire ■ Distributor: Red Ant ■ Price: \$69.95 ■ Rating: G8+ ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

P600
192Mb RAM
32 Mb Videocard
500Mb HDD space

WANT

P1Gz+
256Mb RAM

MULTIPLAYER

No

ONLINE

www.vegas.com
Check out what
you're up against

Welcome to the strip. You've got the seedy night life, the slick lounge singers and the family-friendly stage magicians getting snacked on by their pet animals. With this game it's all at your finger tips. From All-American (let's include Mayan in that) to Japanese, from Sci-Fi to Lost World, the themes offer great range and each comes with different statues and signage as well as slightly different casino interiors.

Once you build a casino you get to place Blackjack, Five Card Stud and Roulette tables, Slot Machines, Sport Lounges, Keno boards and so on, as well as setting betting limits and even how rigged the game is in your favour. There are a lot of options – each of which could have gone a little deeper – but there's definitely enough for the strategy side.

Sleaze it up

You get a choice of a sandbox mode or a series of scenarios where you have to build Vegas-style entertainment complexes and try to wring as much cash as you can from the suckers with heavy wallets. The casino side of things is handled pretty well and between the range of tables and the population information, careful players should always be able to work out what they should be building (going family or going

TAPPING THE HIGH ROLLERS

High rollers can tip thousands of dollars at a time and their word can be worth several times as much in reputation. Luring and trapping one of these guys is big game hunting. First you have to bait them with your smooth style and big signs.

Next, you have to make sure you all the games tahat they like, then you go to the Pit Supervisor's Office and start playing with the "comp" settings. Complimentary drinks, food, transport and chips can all make a body feel welcome, and if that's not enough you can build a Hospitality Suite and hire "hosts" that you can assign to certain visitors, for that special pampering.

sleaze for example), instead of relying on trial and error.

The only real weakness in the basic formula comes with the non-casino attractions, like your Shark Tanks, Night Clubs, Soda Shops and Art Galleries. They don't pull as much cash in general (which is to be expected) but they are also very limited in what you can do with them. A few more options like being able to choose the type of movie your cinema

shows or being able to go into the strip clubs would have been nice. This is Vegas after all!

Going after the G8+ rating has robbed this game of some of its teeth, besides keeping you out of strip joints, you don't even get the option to send hired goons after big winners. On the upside, the dirty business of cleaning and maintenance isn't a large focus of the game – as it is with a lot of these tycoon titles – and with a little fore-thought you never have to get bogged down in any of it.

The 3D in the game works really well to drop you into the vice of Vegas. The only problem is that to move around the screen, you have to centre on a building and then zoom in out and around. You can't just scroll side-to-side like in any regular game which is a strange omission, albeit a minor one.

The scenarios are pretty well laid-out and features a variety of objectives (from luring high-rollers, to being the first to make a \$4000 profit in a day, to getting a number of family sales) but – like all these games – it comes down to whether you have the desire to make something lavish, beautiful, functional and, in this case, decadent. If that's what you're looking for, then you'll probably make it big with this one.

Timothy C. Best

RATING



OVERALL

A nicely vice-y 3D
visit to the Tycoon
series.

73





Rugby 2004

Let's all jump on top of each other and start rucking!

Developer: HB Studios ■ Publisher: EA Sports ■ Distributor: Electronic Arts ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: G ■ Available: Now

Rugby Union is a perplexing game. The aim seems simple enough: bash the other team into the turf and – if there's enough time – score some points as well. But there's much more to the sport than fat blokes bashing each other. The camaraderie, the passion, and national honour so intense that often fully grown men – many of whom way over one tenth of a tonne – weep with pride at the rendition of their national anthem.

The first thing one notices is that, graphically, it just doesn't compare to other EA titles, such as the Madden 2004. Despite the fact that R2004 was almost certainly made on a much smaller budget than its American counterparts, it's somewhat hard to forgive some of the graphical anomalies. Most noticeable is the fact that players seem to "warp" into position around rucks, giving the animation a jerky, unrealistic feel.

basic inaccuracies such as giving Wendell Sailor a head of hair to make Bert Newton jealous

Add this to the fact that HB Studios has botched the recreation of many players and teams, and Rugby initially stands out as looking rather unpolished. Although they do not directly affect gameplay, basic inaccuracies such as making Rokocoko white, giving Wendell Sailor a head of hair to make Bert Newton jealous and often erroneous commentary stinks of an under-researched, half-arsed job right from the get go. The game does include a player creation tool with which the rugger enthusiast could correct many of the errors, although the creation-options are very limited (you can't even specify height and weight).

But don't fear, rugby fans, it's not all bad. Astonishingly, HB Studios has managed to recreate the feel of playing rugby quite convincingly, despite the aforementioned flaws. For one, the system used for lineouts is exemplary, requiring practise and timing, and yielding a great sense of satisfaction when you execute it perfectly. With the exception of the side-step (which is almost useless against the AI), all of the options and controls in R2004 are implemented well (the player even has the opportunity to purposefully foul in order to sway the advantage).

Far more realistic than the 2001 version, 2004 offers a much more detailed and satisfying mode of gameplay. The rucking animations are much more realistic now (although the players still loiter annoyingly around the rucks before joining them), however the interactive rucks of the previous title are missed, as they are now largely automated. Despite this, the new game has taken leaps and bounds forwards in other aspects of play, such as lineouts and scrums.

Rugby 2004 also offers the player boundless options not present in R2001, such as the Super 12, European Cup, British Isles tour and World League tournaments, playable in almost 70 real life stadiums (World League allows you to manage the recruitment aspects of your own fantasy team through multiple seasons). Like its predecessor, R2004 also includes the World Cup, Tri Nations and Six Nations tournaments.

Victor Webster

SYSTEM

NEED

P3 500Mhz
128MB Ram
32MB 3D Video
800MB HDD

WANT

2600Mhz+
256MB Ram
128MB GeForce

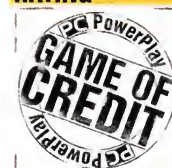
MULTIPLAYER

Yes

ONLINE

www.rugby2004.com
An online society of opinionated rugby madmen. Come and discuss the computer game, the World Cup, or argue the exact extent of how much more skill is needed to play union than league.

RATING



OVERALL

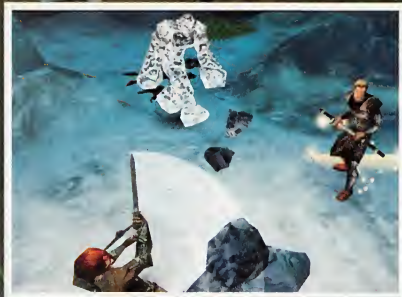
Shows some great innovation. Full of potential but let down by unforgivable flaws.

74



ANNOYING AI

It must be difficult programming AI for a complex sporting simulation, thus on harder difficulty settings, many developers resort to simply increasing the AI players' statistics instead of actually making them play them game in a more clever fashion. Unfortunately, Rugby 2004 is no exception. It seems that even on the hardest difficulty setting, using the worst team in the game, an expert player can still outplay the AI in general gameplay, only to be magically demolished at the rucks (they're the big pile up of players where the teams compete for possession) by the super-strength AI. Needless to say, this lazy programming results in a very frustrating experience on the 'hard' difficulty setting when using a weaker team.



Dungeon Siege Legends of Aranna

More than just a screensaver

Developer: Mad Doc Software ■ Publisher: Microsoft ■ Distributor: Microsoft ■ Price: \$69.95 ■ Rating: M 15+ ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

PIII 333Mhz CPU or equivalent
128Mb RAM
8Mb Video Card
1.6Gb HDD

WANT

P4 2.0Ghz CPU or equivalent
512Mb RAM
64Mb 3D Video Card
1.6Gb HDD

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

ONLINE

www.dungeonsiege.com
A good resource for Dungeon Siege mods and siegetests, adding the gameplay the developer forgot.

When Dungeon Siege was first released it was hailed as something of a technical marvel as it was the first game of its type to feature seamless worlds with no loading times. As a consequence many of the initial reviews were absolutely glowing as the critics were taken in by the genius of the engine rather than the game (or lack thereof) tacked on top. Ultimately the game could have been likened to a screensaver - the player had a bit of influence on the course of events but by and large it would play itself with the AI controlling all combat (including the player character) and the levels being so painfully linear that they amounted to mere narrow corridors of monsters. Whilst the first expansion pack doesn't alleviate the problem of the overly intrusive AI and a lack of actual gameplay, it does go a long way to improving the overall game design, delivering a number of maps that actually have branching paths and back-tracking



factored into them. Oh yeah, there's a new story as well revolving around the island of Aranna, an ancient being known as the Shadow Jumper and a giant clock that controls everything. As far as Diablo-esque game plots go it's quite a good one.

Opening up

Of course saying that the expansion pack has infinitely better level design than the original game is kind of like saying that Michael Jackson was a better musician when he was a black man than he is now that he's a white shemale - it's a fairly easy statement to make and it's a bit of a given that no one aside from freakish fanboys will do out of their way to dispute it. Instead of the simple tight corridors of Dungeon Siege, Legends of Aranna features a number of open areas, alternate routes, hidden areas and large dungeon complexes that require exploration as well as backtracking. It's no longer possible to complete the game simply by setting the AI to the most aggressive level and allowing it to run from one combat to the next, only occasionally needing the player's input to open a door.

Legends of Aranna features around 20 hours of gameplay which is ultimately quite an achievement due to the fact that none of it is particularly challenging at all, meaning that the developer has had to



create a lot of content to keep you busy. The expansion also supports online play, now with the added bonus of being able to export your single player character into the multiplayer game, an odd move considering that Aranna features legendary artefact items as well as item sets, all found throughout the single player game. We have not been able to join an online game to see if the items will remain in the character possession or will disappear but we assume that unique will not mean what it once did if you catch our drift. Although Legends of Aranna may sound like the same old crap with a different smell it is an improvement over the original game as well as being good value for money - the expansion sells at budget price and comes with a full version of Dungeon Siege.

Daniel Wilks

RATING



OVERALL

Not a bad game as such, just lacking in enough player input to make it genuinely satisfying.

60

DUNGEON SIEGE: LEGENDS OF FRAMERATE

A host of new monsters and spell effects are on show in the expansion pack and they do look quite impressive, though somewhat dated by today's standards. One thing that is definitely worrying about the Dungeon Siege engine is how chuggy it can become. The computer it was tested on is far from top of the line but a Athlon 2000+ with 512Mb RAM and a Radeon 9600 should be able to pull more than 15 frames a second during battles, even with most effects (aside from complex shadows) turned up and the resolution set at a staggering 1024x768. Luckily the game remains playable and fairly smooth at low frame rates.



Conquering the world one square at a time.

Civilization III Conquests

Just don't mention Play the World

Developer: Firaxis ■ Publisher: Atari ■ Distributor: Atari ■ Price: \$49.95 ■ Rating: G8+ ■ Available: Now

Poor old Civ. It might always have been recognised as design genius, but it couldn't quite keep up with the popularity of RTS games and their multiplayer-friendly nature. The series tried, but it never quite got there, culminating with the embarrassment of the buggy Play the World expansion.

Until now. Conquests is here and while it doesn't make multiplayer Civ mana from heaven, it does make up for the sins of Play the World. This baby adds more units, seven new civilisations (or 16 new ones if you don't have PtW, bringing the total to 31), two new civilisation characteristics (Seafaring and Agricultural), five new wonders, new editor tools, new victory conditions, two new levels of difficulty (Demi-God and Sid), and the whole game has been rebalanced with countless tweaks based on input from thousands of players.

LIGHT TOUCHES

Conquests comes with a huge list of tweaks and re-balancing, so I guess I should mention a few just so you have some idea what to expect. Wonders now can attract tourists which you can milk for extra cash, which is really cool. Governments have been tweaked, and Republic gets spanked with military maintenance costing twice as much. Fascism has been added for the modern warmonger, and Feudalism has become a new stepping stone to Monarchy and helps smooth out the early game. The whole tech tree has been adjusted and although the changes are fairly minor, they seem on the money. Although Republicans will hate it, for those in for the long haul, these refinements are worth admission alone.



which is not only unpleasant, but gives you a hulking big cultural bonus

The biggest addition is the Conquests. These are like new scenarios, but only so much more. Each one takes a historic time of strife and cultural significance and then drops the player into the middle of it, with appropriate cities, tech-level, renamed and redesigned units, re-written tech trees and Civopedia, and totally re-tooled victory conditions and game rules.

Most are pretty standard missions with one almighty twist. For example, in the Mesoamerican Conquest, you have all three starting civs sharing one small piece of real-estate and cultural supremacy is the goal. Things get interesting because you can now enslave enemy units and sacrifice them to your gods... which is not only unpleasant, but gives you a hulking big cultural bonus.

The Conquests are all available for multiplayer games and you can play any of the major factions involved (including the barbarians in one which makes a nice change of pace). Players will often find that the sides – enemies and allies – are locked to make sure that things keep some historical merit as well as quickly

defining what's going down in multiplayer games.

One of the great beauties of the Conquests is that it breaks the game of Civ down into more focused and bite-sized portions, some of which won't go past an hour or two. Civ doesn't have to be a several-day-long affair now. You can take a limited turn scenario (from a heck of a lot of different angles, mind you) and avoid the eras of the game that don't thrill you. This is also great for making sure that everyone is on the same page. When you're looking for a good challenge it just doesn't cut it to be rolling over Swordsman in Tanks.

Even if you love the epic nature of Civ and the confining Conquests don't do it for you the sheer number balance tweaks and new additions, from civilisations to victory conditions, make this worth your dime.

If you haven't bothered with Play the World or the Gold edition, you also get the whole new frontier of multiplayer. There's just too much on offer here for any Civ fan to miss.

Timothy C. Best

SYSTEM

NEED

500Mhz CPU
128Mb RAM
4Mb Videocard
additional 600Mb
HDD space

WANT

1Ghz+
256Mb RAM
16Mb Videocard

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

ONLINE

www.firaxis.com
Check out the pics
of Sid himself!

RATING



OVERALL

A fantastic expansion,
well designed and
packed solid

87

Harry Potter Quidditch World Cup

Kids for a Quid

Developer: EA ■ Publisher: EA ■ Distributor: EA ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: G8+ ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

P3-500
64MB RAM
16MB Videocard
500MB HDD

WANT

128MB RAM
Gamepad

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

ONLINE

www.harrypotter.com
We wonder if that URL exists...?

Take away the premise of flying around on broomsticks and the magical nature of the balls in the game and Quidditch, the one and only sport respected in the wizarding world of Harry Potter, and you still have a very solid idea for a game that could be played across all range of literary genres. Exchange the brooms for jetpacks and you have the perfect science fiction sport for example, a fast-paced cross between football and rollerball.

For those of you unfamiliar with the books, Quidditch is an equally fast-paced game played by two teams, each simultaneously trying to score goals (worth ten points) whilst special players known as Seekers scour the play area for a small, fast moving and erratic ball known as the Golden Snitch, itself worth a staggering 150 points and, rather than a time count, signals the end of the game.

To make things more difficult on all of the players, special belligerent balls known as Bludgers fly around the play area doing their darnedest to knock players off their brooms and preferably do



special belligerent balls known as Bludgers fly around the play area

them serious injury. To protect the other players from harm, each team has two players known as Beaters, whose job it is to literally beat the Bludger away from the other players. Players can take the role of any of the four Hogwarts houses as well as play as many of the characters made famous by the novels including of course Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy. Aside from competing in the school cup, players can take their team all the way to the top, the prestigious Quidditch World Cup. Got all that? Good.

EA definitely deserves its share of kudos for bringing the lively game of Quidditch to life and doing a remarkably good job of it. Unfortunately for all the professionalism of the game it is not without its share of problems, most of which revolve around the controls. To simplify the game for its intended young market, EA has given the player control of the Seeker and Chasers (the players who score goals) whilst blocking goals is

totally up to the AI and interaction with the Beaters is limited to occasionally hitting the "beat" button and sending the Bludger hurtling towards the opposition's Chasers. Whilst this simplification is a welcome respite for what could have been an overly complicated and unapproachable game, it suffers from a certain sluggishness and arbitrary nature in the controls that seriously detracts from the overall enjoyment of the title.

Player speed seems to be randomly selected by the computer and you can never be sure how maneuverable your player will be - in one moment you may be able to turn on a five cent piece but the next you might fly as comfortably as a cow tied to the side of a truck. Also disappointing is the fact that keyboard/mouse support is fairly terrible making Quidditch World Cup yet another recent port that really needs a gamepad to play properly.

Daniel Wilks

RATING



OVERALL

Still needs work to make it into the big leagues.

67

COMBO

Players have the ability to string together a number of passes to score combo goals. Whilst these combos are very satisfying to pull off the fact that they can't be blocked seriously detracts from the rest of the game - why bother playing normally when the fairly easy combos are so powerful? Be that as it may, there are also a number of special moves that can be unlocked by winning games and collecting Quidditch trading cards (in game). Harry Potter fans will find themselves coming back for more just to see what else they can unlock.



The Simpsons: Hit & Run

Eat asphalt, asphalt eaters



Developer: Radical ■ Publisher: Vivendi ■ Distributor: Vivendi ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: G 8+ ■ Available: Now

To set the record straight, The Simpsons: Hit & Run is far and away the best Simpsons game to date. None of the other titles based on the famed cartoon license can hold a candle to it, but then again, being better than the dross we've been delivered so far is no hard task. For as long as the show has been around it has seemed as though the license was somehow cursed – how else could you rationalise the creation of The Simpsons Wrestling or Skateboarding. Ultimately it appeared as though the problem was a matter of not using the license at all, as the developers seemed more than happy to make any old game and then place a Simpsons skin over the top, throw in a couple of repetitive sound-bites and rely on people's love of the series to keep the sales flowing. Not so with Hit & Run. The game fully utilises the license, delivering up a game chock full of Simpsons humour, situations and flavour.

Great! I dropped my kabob!

Hit & Run is essentially a parody/tribute to GTA3 and sees Homer, Bart, Lisa, Marge and Apu driving around Springfield in a variety of vehicles ranging from the family car to the Honor Roller, Mr. Plow or a black surveillance van. Although the overall plot sounds a little stupid even for the Simpsons –

MY BIKINI ZONE IS CHAFING

Whilst it's somewhat strange that the developers didn't opt to use cell shading for the graphics (surely a 2D rendering style is the perfect vehicle for a 2D cartoon), the voice acting on display is nothing short of spectacular. All of the dialogue was written specifically for the game and is performed with the gusto we've come to know and love in the cartoon. As an added bonus for all you people out there who have an interest in literature theory, some of the characters in the game display the metafictional knowledge that they are actually cartoon characters in a game based on their adventures.

Springfield is invaded by swarms of giant mechanical wasps with cameras for heads and a brigade of surveillance vans – the actually reason behind the device and the underlying plot conceits are very true to form. Although GTA3 is the obvious basis for the game don't go in expecting to see Marge cut a bloody swathe in traffic with her minigun or Homer take out Mr. Burns with a well placed Molotov cocktail. The violence is seriously toned down in the game with the only weapons the

characters having access to being a kick only good for knocking people down (and aggravating the police), breaking crates or destroying wasps. Even stealing cars has been rendered non-violent with the former driver remaining in the vehicle throughout. In a nice touch when either Bart or Lisa hop in a vehicle it appears as though they are actually "lift-jacking" as the driver remains in the driver's seat.

The level design seen in Hit & Run is excellent in conception with the city of Springfield laid out in a sensible way – the Krusty Burger is near the arcade which is in turn near the Android's Dungeon comic shop. Unfortunately each of the characters is restricted to their own area so there is no opportunity to see Homer tooling around in the city centre or have Bart make mischief at the power plant. Missions range from races to destroying other cars to collecting objects. If you've ever wanted to become a tobacco farmer this game's for you.

Aside from the story missions, Hit & Run features a number of incidental missions as well as extra vehicles to purchase, extra outfits (though why anyone would want to see Homer in anything but his fat guy muumuu is beyond me) and collect secret trading cards to unlock even more content.

Daniel Wilks

SYSTEM

NEED

PIII 700MHz or equivalent CPU
192Mb RAM
32Mb 3D Video Card
1.5GB HDD

WANT

PIII 1.0GHz or equivalent CPU
256Mb RAM
64Mb 3D Video Card
1.5GB HDD

MULTIPLAYER

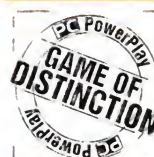
No

ONLINE

www.smpg.com/guides/cbafile.html

If the comic book guy was real he'd be impressed by the level of fanboy dedication.

RATING



OVERALL

To coin a Fat Comic Book Guy term, Best. Simpsons Game. Ever.

78



TECH IN REVIEW

If music makes the world go 'round, it's no wonder my head is pulling a Linda Blair. After spending a couple of weeks of doing nothing but playing with MP3 players, I'll be pretty happy if I never hear another song ever again. But at least I learnt one thing - these little bundles of technological innovation have come a long way in a very short time. Compared to my Rio 500, which offered a whopping 64MB of onboard memory (WOW! I can fit almost ten songs onto it!), the MP3 players of today appear to have been crafted by a highly advanced alien culture. Like the Tardis, on the outside they appear to be very small, but on the inside it's a roomy world with plenty of space to go round. Some have even hit a whopping 60GB of storage space, enough to hold all of the tunes shared across the University of New South Wales' intranet in one day!

For those of you without the surname "Moneybags" we've got a nice little head to head between the mid range contenders from ATI and NVIDIA. No prizes for guessing who gets the big ol' PCPP thumbs up.

One of the more interesting gadgets Stuart checked out this month promises to replace the need for a dedicated media PC, provided you run a wireless network. This little box of goodness plugs into your TV and stereo, and then wirelessly streams music and images to your high end Hi-Fi gear. Neat. Unfortunately it doesn't do video, but we're sure this feature will be included in a future version.

Hopefully you all scored big time with Christmas pressies, so



let's take a look at some of the products that will make your shiny new thing look totally obsolete.

Bennett Ring
Deputy Editor,
bennetttr@next.com.au

- 90 ASUS RADEON 9600XT versus NVIDIA GeForce FX 5700 Ultra
- 92 Creative Inspire T7700 eAudio SHT-6B 5.1
- 94 Linksys WMA11B Mission3D Photo3D 303
- 96 Creative Prodikeys

HOW WE TESTED

For an in-depth explanation of how we test video cards, CPUs, and motherboards head to our PowerTools section on page 104. You'll also see a list of hardware that makes up the PCPP testbenches, which are used for the testing of the majority of our hardware.

Where possible we use benchmarks based on real world games to test hardware performance; this way we know for sure which component will give you the best gaming experience. We don't love hardware for hardware's sake - it's all about using this hardware to make your

entertainment even more, well, entertaining. We also try to compare the review product with the current "best of class" piece of hardware, so at the end of the day you'll know exactly which product offers you the best bang for buck.

For a product to earn a Power Award, price be damned, we're just looking at how this product performs. If there's nothing better, that we've seen at least, it'll get the Power Award. However, if a product offers a great level of performance or features for a very reasonable price, it'll get the Value Award. Simple, really.





Even though we no longer have an endless supply of easy to find, free digital tunes (ahhh, Napster, how I loved thee), MP3 files have become the predominant musical media for all but the most ill-informed technology lover. Portable MP3 players offer unrivalled portability, skip free playback, astounding battery life, and they're, well, just

plain cool. Much to the dismay of our now shattered ear drums, we tested 27 of the top MP3 players, just so you know which one will keep you bopping away at the bus stop like an idiot for years to come.

There are three main categories of MP3 player, differentiated by the way they store music. The most popular are flash memory based,

Digital Dub

No self respecting geek would be caught dead listening to music on a cassette walkman. Even portable CD players are oh so passé. MP3 is where it's all at, so Bennett Ring took a look at 27 of the hottest MP3 players on the market.



which use memory chips to store your music, and have no moving parts whatsoever. These tend to have a small amount of memory, between 128MB and 256MB. Next on the list are CD-ROM based players, and for these you must first burn your MP3s to CD. Due to the dirt cheap price of CDs, these offer the best compromise between capacity (offering around 680MB of storage) and price, but are also the largest of the bunch. Finally we have

Jukeboxes, which are built around hard drives. These have by far the largest capacity, ranging between 10GB and 60GB, but they also tend to hurt the hip pocket the most, and aren't quite portable enough for those who like to exercise while listening to music. As if that's going to apply to any of the PowerPlay readers though!

When looking for an MP3 player, it's wise to keep an eye (or should that be an ear?) out for a couple of

If possible, have a listen to the player using your own headphones...

key points. Obviously the price is going to be a consideration, so look for the type that offers the best balance between price and capacity. Many of the cheaper players are built about as sturdily as an aluminium foil ashtray, so make sure your chosen player will be able to take the punishment you'll be dishing it.

If possible, have a listen to the player using your own headphones – many ship with, quite frankly, shit house ear buds that don't do the player any favours. Check to make sure that the player is loud enough for your liking, as many of the budget models pump out as much bass as a pin hitting the floor.

Using the player and uploading tracks should be a breeze, and this is especially important with the larger Jukeboxes, as organising a few thousand tracks can be a hassle if you're lumbered with an unintuitive interface.

Time to Boogey

When testing these players we did not use the included craptastical headphones, instead choosing to use a set of the sweet sounding Sennheiser PC150 cans reviewed back in Issue 94 (Syntec

International, ph 02 9417 4700). We then uploaded six different tracks to the player: two Midnight Oil heavy rockers, two dance oonse-oonse 'toons', and finally two classical compositions. These were all encoded at 192kbps per second, at 44.1kHz, as this seems to be the most common format for those looking for a nice balance between sound quality and file size. After having a good listen to these, it soon became apparent that there wasn't a single player that had shocking quality – every one was more than good enough for all but the most rectally challenged audiophile. However, where they differed most was in the volume that each was capable of pumping out, as well as the bass levels. All players were weighed (with battery inserted) and measured for dimensions.

Finally we gave each one a bit of a thrashing to see if we could snap any bits off them, as your cluttered pockets aren't exactly the most friendly environment for fragile digital equipment.

Now that you know our scientific methodology for testing these players, let's shake some booty and see which one deserves your moolah.

Apacer Audio Steno NV400

• Price: \$259 • Supplier: BlueChip IT www.bluechipit.com.au

Looking more like a mobile phone than an MP3 player, this lengthy player is much larger than other flash memory based players of the same capacity. While it's only got 128MB of built in memory, you can whack an SD card into the back to increase the capacity as far as your wallet will allow. Voice recording capability is also included. Uploading tracks doesn't require

any software at all (provided you're running WinXP or Win2K) – just plug in the USB cable and away you go. You can even plug the player directly into your USB port without a cable, provided you've got a bit of room to move around the USB port. Sound quality was excellent, at a nice loud volume, but it's just a pity that this thing is so darn big.

SPECIFICATIONS

- Size: 124mm x 37mm x 15mm
- Weight: 68g
- Memory: 128MB + upgradeable via SD
- Rechargeable battery: No

PCPP SCORE

Overall 3.5/5



Apacer Audio Steno BP300

• Price: \$190 • Supplier: BlueChip IT www.bluechipit.com.au

It's hard to believe that you can now purchase a 128MB MP3 player for less than two hundred big ones. Sure, it's constructed from relatively flimsy plastic, but unless you're into body slamming your MP3 player it should last pretty well.

This is another plug and play unit, which is a bloody good thing, and it's also capable of voice recording. Like most of the units

tested, sound quality was good, although it wasn't quite as crisp as some of the pricier units, but at least it's loud enough to wake up the neighbours – provided they live inside your skull, like the evil Satanic worshippers I share a cranium with. Oh, time for my medication already. In all a very nicely priced player, just be a little careful with how you handle it.

SPECIFICATIONS

- Size: 96mm x 32mm x 27mm
- Weight: 43g
- Memory: 128MB
- Rechargeable battery: No

PCPP SCORE

Overall 4/5





Apple iPod

• Price: \$529 for 10GB, \$699 for 20GB, \$899 for 40GB • Supplier: Apple www.apple.com.au

The iPod costs a little more than comparative MP3 jukeboxes, but it's worth every shiny white penny. It looks great, with brilliant build quality, and uses touch sensitive buttons that are much less likely to break than standard toggle switches. Sound quality is out of this world, arguable the best in the entire roundup, and there are a plethora of functions that a PDA

would be proud of, including a clock, contact list management, calendar and notes. The interface is superb, allowing you manage play lists on the fly, and to even rate songs depending on how much you like them. If there is one problem, it's that the rechargeable battery isn't removable, so you'll need to send it in to Apple every few years for a replacement.

SPECIFICATIONS

- Size: 105mm x 64mm x 19mm
- Weight: 176 grams
- Memory: Various
- Rechargeable battery: Yes

PCPP SCORE

Overall 4.5/5



Creative MX100

• Price: 128MB \$279 256MB \$379 • Supplier: Creative www.soundblaster.com.au

Looking like a silver, cyborg tampon, this player simply oozes class, if sanitary napkins are your kind of thing. It's got a very sturdy feel to it, and the front is dominated by a large LCD screen which displays track and player information, as well as a cool little graphic equaliser.

Doubling as a voice recorder and FM radio, copying songs over to this

player is as simple as plugging it into a spare USB port and dragging files onto the new disk icon that will show up under My Computer.

While the sound quality is exceptionally clear, the volume that it pumps out was a little lacking for our rave-ruined ear drums. It's still a very solid little player, but could do with a little more oomph.

SPECIFICATIONS

- Size: 80mm x 44mm x 17mm
- Weight: 53g
- Memory: Various
- Rechargeable battery: Yes

PCPP SCORE

Overall 4/5



Creative NOMAD Jukebox Zen Xtra

• Price: \$899 • Supplier: Creative www.soundblaster.com.au

Creative's answer to the iPod, this player has one thing that the iPod doesn't – a removable rechargeable battery. So when the battery dies in a couple of year's time, you can simply replace it, unlike the iPod which needs to be returned to Apple for servicing. It's got a bigger screen than its predecessor, the Zen NX, but other than that they're pretty much identical.

But how good does it sound, I pretend to hear you ask? Bloody good, as a matter of fact – you'd need to have the ears of a TX Terminator to pick the difference between this unit and the iPod. Unfortunately it's not quite as sexy as the iPod nor as exercise friendly, and the interface seems less intuitive, but we love the decision to make the battery removable.

SPECIFICATIONS

- Size: 114mm x 77mm x 24mm
- Weight: 233g
- Memory: 60GB
- Rechargeable battery: Yes

PCPP SCORE

Overall 4/5



Creative NOMAD MuVo NX

• Price: 128MB \$299 256MB \$399 • Supplier: Creative www.soundblaster.com.au

This tricky little player splits into two parts to expose the USB plug, which can then be plugged straight into your XP machine with nary a driver, nor cable, in sight. It's got a relatively small screen, but also includes voice recording functions – not bad for such a small package.

Sound quality is excellent, albeit nowhere near as loud as some of the

more expensive players. Unfortunately it's also quite pricey when compared to the likes of the Apacer BP300, with a price around 50% higher than the Apacer unit, but it's definitely a much more rugged unit.

SPECIFICATIONS

- Size: 74mm x 35mm x 15mm
- Weight: 43g
- Memory: Various
- Rechargeable battery: No

PCPP SCORE

Overall 3.5/5



Creative Slim600

• Price: \$369 • Supplier: Creative www.soundblaster.com.au

Compared to the other CD-based anorexic beauties in the PowerTest, this player is positively massive. Ok, it's not quite up there with the likes of the MPZ00 Exonion, but it's definitely a heavyweight compared to the other slim line CD-based models. At least Creative were able to squeeze an LCD screen onto the front of the unit, unlike its skinnier competitors.

It takes a while to spin up your disk and upload data to its buffer, which is surprising considering that tracks occasionally skipped, even when the player was totally stationary. But when it's not skipping like a little girl on Ritalin, the sound quality is impressive, being both loud and crisp. Not a bad CD-based player, but certainly not the best value for money compared to others.

SPECIFICATIONS

- Size: 144g x 134g x 24mm
- Weight: 243g
- Memory: CD-ROM
- Rechargeable battery: Yes

PCPP SCORE

Overall 3/5



Exonion Any CDP

• Price: \$265 • Supplier: Mstation www.mstation.com.au

For such a small, sexy little package, this CD-based rip snorter packs a lot of punch. It's got a couple of rechargeable batteries, which can be easily replaced when their time is up. While the actual player doesn't have an LCD screen, the small remote control that is included does, and this displays all the info you could possibly need.

Backing up these great looks and small dimensions is its superb sound quality, pumping out enough volume to rattle even the most hardened ear drums, and it's all crystal clear. Combine all this with a marriage friendly price of \$265, and the Any CDP ends up being the only CD-based player worthy of your attention.

SPECIFICATIONS

- Size: 136mm x 133mm x 15mm
- Weight: 208g
- Memory: CD based
- Rechargeable battery: Yes

PCPP SCORE

Overall 4.5/5



Frontier Labs Nex ia

• Price: \$181 • Supplier: Rome www.rome.com.au

This is one of the few players without any built in memory, instead relying upon CF cards that must be purchased in addition to the cost of the player. So add another \$100 for a 128MB CF card, or \$100 for a 340MB Micro Drive (which is damn good value). It's a bit of a clunker – just check out those weight and size specs if you don't believe me, but it's built like the proverbial

brick poo house, so will easily handle a bit of rough and tumble.

Despite the manual's instructions to install the drivers, we managed to copy songs onto the player without any. The Nex ia produced clear sound, although not as good as most of the players, and several of the songs tended to skip, which is surprising considering the media format.

SPECIFICATIONS

- Size: 83mm x 65mm x 23mm
- Weight: 138g
- Memory: None
- Rechargeable battery: No

PCPP SCORE

Overall 3/5



I-MPIA 4000

• Price: 128MB \$295 256MB \$395 • Supplier: Efx www.efx.com.au

This is one of the few MP3 players that allows you to hook an input directly to the player and encode MP3 files on the fly. Not that 99.99% of you will use it, as you'll simply download your freshly KAZAA'd, I mean, encoded MP3 files directly from your PC anyway. Another innovative touch is the inclusion of dual headphone outputs, guaranteed to cause hours

of arguments between you and your listening partner.

It's a relatively big player, yet is one of the lightest in the PowerTest, but incorporates an FM radio and voice recorder, which goes some way to justifying its size. Sound quality was up to scratch, but this player doesn't quite live up to the standards of some of the other similarly priced flash memory based units.

SPECIFICATIONS

- Size: 90mm x 34mm x 14mm
- Weight: 39g
- Memory: 128MB
- Rechargeable battery: No

PCPP SCORE

Overall 3.5/5



iRiver iHP-120

• Price: \$699 20GB • Supplier: Creative www.soundblaster.com.au

The standout features of this digital jukebox are its small size, the smallest of the jukeboxes in fact, and its ability to play Ogg Vorbis files (this file format is being primed as the successor to MP3). It's even got optical in and out – the only player in the entire roundup to feature this.

If you're a driver hating, uploading application loathing

bundle of anger like us, you'll appreciate the plug and play nature of this device. Sound quality was equal to the best of those in the PowerTest, all at a volume that will rattle your brain.

It doesn't have some of the information management features seen on the iPod, and it's not quite as sexy, but other than that it's a fine MP3 player indeed.

SPECIFICATIONS

- Size: 105mm x 60mm x 21mm
- Weight: 162g
- Memory: 20GB
- Rechargeable: Yes

PCPP SCORE

Overall 4.5/5



iRiver SlimX

• Price: \$359 • Supplier: JNC www.jnc-digital.com.au

Claiming to be the world's slimmest MP3 CD player, judging by our PowerTest, it certainly is... by about 1mm, with the Exonion Any CDP being almost as titchy.

Like the Exonion, this player ships with a couple of slim line rechargeable batteries, that can be replaced when the Nickel Metal Hydride grim reaper of pays a visit.

Sound quality is excellent, but it could do with a bit more volume.

There is only one major difference between this player and the Any CDP – price. At almost one hundred big ones more than the Any CDP, we simply can't justify the purchase of the SlimX.

SPECIFICATIONS

- Size: 136mm x 130mm x 14mm
- Weight: 201g
- Memory: CD-based
- Rechargeable battery: Yes

PCPP SCORE

Overall 3.5/5



JNC SSF-312

• Price: \$449 • Supplier: JNC www.jnc-digital.com.au

MP3 players come in some weird shapes and sizes. Take this one for example – it's fashioned more like a pack of titanium lifesavers than a standard MP3 player. The SSF-312 manages to squeeze a lot of features into a small package, including voice recording and an FM radio, and it's built to last, although we did notice that it's prone to getting dust between the LCD screen

and its plastic cover.

The interface for this product was simple enough for even a Mac user to figure out, and the driverless installation was most appreciated.

Like most JNC products, sound quality was superb, although it wasn't quite loud enough for our liking. Other than this, the only complaint we can make is the price, which is quite steep.

SPECIFICATIONS

- Size: 86mm x 25mm x 25mm
- Weight: 46g
- Memory: 256MB
- Rechargeable battery: No

PCPP SCORE

Overall 3.5/5



JNC SSF-33

• Price: \$439 • Supplier: JNC www.jnc-digital.com.au

What tha? A flash memory based player that needs drivers? Tsk tsk, not good at all. Add this to the fact that you have to use the JNC Loader Plus application to upload songs, rather than just drag and drop to the player via My Computer, and things aren't looking rosy for this player.

Just when we thought things couldn't get any worse, we noticed

the price. Sure, it's a 256MB player, and has excellent sound, features (voice recorder and FM radio) and build quality, but it's simply too expensive.

SPECIFICATIONS

- Size: 80mm x 36mm x 15mm
- Weight: 47g
- Memory: 256MB
- Rechargeable battery: No

PCPP SCORE

Overall 3/5



LG MF-PD390

• Price: \$436 • Supplier: LG www.lge.com.au

This sexy 128MB player certainly looks the part, with aesthetics that even a design student would be happy to be seen with.

Unfortunately it's one of the few flash memory based players that require the installation of drivers – not a big deal but a bit of a pain nonetheless. Once you've installed these, it's simply a matter of plugging the player into the

provided USB cable, and dragging and dropping your files into it.

You won't be disappointed with the excellent sound quality on offer, which stood out as having some of the meatiest bass of all of the players, but it could do with a little more volume.

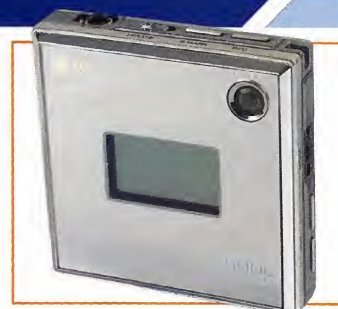
So far so good. And then we saw the price. Almost \$450 for a titchy 128MB player? Ged oudda here...

SPECIFICATIONS

- Size: 62mm x 62mm x 15mm
- Weight: 58g
- Memory: 128MB
- Rechargeable battery: No

PCPP SCORE

Overall 2.5/5



LG MF-PE550

• Price: \$499 • Supplier: LG www.lge.com.au

LG make some spooze worthy players, with this being another example of their exquisite eye candy. It's a little big for its capacity, but the ability to directly encode tracks via the input plug is handy, as is the MMC slot.

This was another of their players that required the installation of drivers, as well as the use of a special uploading application. A

problem with the upload app is that it only transfers files with names of 43 characters or less – which half of our test tracks exceeded. It's a hassle we could do without.

Sound quality was identical to the PD390, with very respectable bass levels. Another similarity between this player and the other LG model is its ridiculously high price. Next!

SPECIFICATIONS

- Size: 80mm x 50mm x 16mm
- Weight: 62g
- Memory: 128MB
- Rechargeable battery:

PCPP SCORE

Overall 2.5/5



MANY Dual Sport

• Price: \$353 • Supplier: Rome www.rome.com.au

As well as the standard MP3 playback, voice recorder and FM radio modes, this player also makes sure you're not about to die of a coronary thanks to the built in heart rate monitor. Sure, it's probably designed more for the keep fit crowd, but we're sure there are a couple of overweight geeks whose lives will be saved by this gadget. You can also hook up a sound source

directly to this player, allowing you to encode MP3s on the fly without the use of a PC, and there's an MMC SD expansion port.

Sound quality was solid yet, like many of the cheaper players, a little too quiet. Regardless, based on the extensive feature list and respectable price, we recommend this player for the health freak in your life.

SPECIFICATIONS

- Size: 90mm x 65mm x 20mm
- Weight: 100g
- Memory: 128MB
- Rechargeable battery: No

PCPP SCORE

Overall 4/5



MANY Slim Box

• Price: \$272 • Supplier: Rome www.rome.com.au

We're not sure how they did it, but the makers of this MP3 player have managed to squeeze a whopping 256MB of memory into a player that costs a mere \$270. In case you hadn't noticed after reading 16 or so mini-reviews, that's damn good value.

This ultra thin player required the use of drivers and special uploading software to transfer

tracks, but we can forgive it these niggling complaints due to the eye popping price.

Considering this bargain basement price point, we weren't expecting the greatest in sound quality. Imagine our surprise when this little beast pumped out the tunes at a quality equal to the best players in our roundup.

Highly recommended.

SPECIFICATIONS

- Size: 78mm x 54mm x 10mm
- Weight: 61g
- Memory:
- Rechargeable battery: Yes

PCPP SCORE

Overall 4.5 /5



MPZ00 Exonion HVC-100E

• Price: \$250 • Supplier: MPZoo www.mpzoo.com.au

The Exonion is getting pretty old these days, yet it's still one of the most feature rich players on offer, playing a wide variety of file types, and with a nice big LCD screen on the front displaying a wealth of information.

Especially noteworthy is the inclusion of a cassette adaptor, allowing you to stream your MP3s from the Exonion into the tape deck

of your car.

Sound quality for the most part is respectable, although we did notice an occasional glitch in the classical tracks. But if you like causing permanent damage to your hearing, this could be the player for you, as it cranks out the toons at volumes unmatched by the other CD-based MP3 players. Not a bad buy, but it's a tad long in the tooth.

SPECIFICATIONS

- Size: 155mm x 138mm x 30mm
- Weight: 330g
- Memory: CD based
- Rechargeable battery: Yes

PCPP SCORE

Overall 3.5/5



MUZIO

• Price: 128MB \$289 256MB \$389 512MB \$530 • Supplier: Mstation www.mstation.com.au

This device utilises an excellent fold out USB port, which enables you to plug it directly into your PC without the need for a cable. It's driver free, and has a remarkably clear OLED screen (most impressive considering its size), and also incorporates an FM radio and voice recorder into this tiny package.

For such a small player, this baby packs a lot of punch. Sound

quality was superb, with plenty of volume, and zero distortion even when cranking out thumping bass lines that would make other players run home to mummy.

If it wasn't for the Slim Box, we wouldn't hesitate to recommend this player. However, due to the higher price, we'd only suggest it to those with a little more to spend.

SPECIFICATIONS

- Size: 84mm x 32mm x 26mm
- Weight: 57g
- Memory: Various
- Rechargeable battery: No

PCPP SCORE

Overall 4/5



Panasonic SL-J900-S

• Price: \$469 • Supplier: Panasonic www.panasonic.com.au

This is a very cool concept. As well as the very schmick slim line CD based MP3 player, this unit includes a docking station. Not only does this docking station recharge the built in battery of the CD player, it also features a couple of slim line speakers. While the sound quality of these isn't exactly phenomenal, they're more than good enough to bring with you to picnics, BBQs and

nude jelly wrestling matches.

Sound quality is superb, with more oomph than its flash memory based brethren, although (as usual) you'd do well to replace the craptastical ear buds that are included with the unit. But like many of the big name brands, where this player falters is the price - it's not worth spending an extra couple of hundred for the speaker base.

SPECIFICATIONS

- Size: 126mm x 126mm x 14mm
- Weight: 178g Stand = 443g
- Memory: CD based
- Rechargeable battery: Yes

PCPP SCORE

Overall 3/5



Panasonic SV-MP31

• Price: \$439 • Supplier: Panasonic www.panasonic.com.au

Panasonic have done away with the need to use special software to upload songs to this MP3 player. Simply plug it into a spare USB port and you're ready to rock. As well as MP3 playback, this player also has an FM radio and the now obligatory voice recorder. It's slightly bigger than previous eWear players we've seen from Panasonic, but is still by no means large, and even thought it's

made entirely from plastic it still feels very sturdy. We managed to crash the unit, but when it worked the sound quality was excellent (once we'd replaced the tinny ear buds), albeit a little quiet.

It's a little more expensive than the other 256MB players, but this is balanced out by the excellent construction, slick styling and sweet sound quality.

SPECIFICATIONS

- Size: 60mm x 42mm x 22mm
- Weight: 45g
- Memory: 256MB
- Rechargeable battery: No

PCPP SCORE

Overall 4/5



Philips exp521

• Price: \$280 • Supplier: Philips www.philips.com.au

Once we got over the fact that this CD-based player didn't have a rechargeable battery, and also included some of the lamest LCD games seen ever since Romero started working on handhelds, we then realised just how damn ugly this hunk of shiny plastic is. It's also by no means slim lined, further disadvantaging it in this crowded market place.

These downfalls could be forgivable if the sound quality was worthy of the ears of the likes of Beethoven, but alas, even this was disappointing. It was nice and loud, but there was definitely a little distortion, even when using our super headphones. Oh well, back to the drawing board Philips. At least it didn't skip...

SPECIFICATIONS

- Size: 139mm x 139mm x 24mm
- Weight: 257g
- Memory: CD based
- Rechargeable battery: No

PCPP SCORE

Overall 2/5



Philips key005

• Price: \$350 • Supplier: Philips www.philips.com.au

If you're after the simplest player you can find, look no further young brain damaged padawan. There's no hint of voice recording, not even a smattering of radio reception – in fact, this thing doesn't even have an LCD screen to let you know what song is playing.

What it does have is one of the sturdiest chassis of all of the MP3 players in the test, making it perfect

for the rock climber/bungy jumper/astronaut in your life.

Sound quality was respectable, although it was one of the quietest in the roundup, and the ability to whack a special AAA battery adaptor on to the unit, to supplement the built in rechargeable, is a nice touch. But then we noticed the price. \$350 for a simple 128MB player? No chance.

SPECIFICATIONS

- Size: 87mm x 26mm x 14mm
- Weight: 38g
- Memory: 128MB
- Rechargeable battery: Yes

PCPP SCORE

Overall 2/5



Samsung Yepp

• Price: \$399 • Supplier: Samsung www.samsung.com.au

This solidly built player has one of the most innovative switches I've ever seen (you know you've seen too many MP3 players when switches start exciting you). To cue through your tracks and menus, simply twist the top of the player, and voila, you're good to go.

Uploading tracks to this player was a driver free affair, and the inclusion of SRS/WOW effects

helped to give this player one of the best levels of sound quality.

While a rechargeable battery would have been nice, we ended up being very impressed by this handy little player. Oh yeah, it's also got a voice recorder and FM radio. Sweet!

SPECIFICATIONS

- Size: 80mm x 25mm x 25mm
- Weight: 56g
- Memory: 256MB
- Rechargeable battery: No

PCPP SCORE

Overall 4.5/5



TeraValue Newgen5

• Price: 128MB \$349 256MB \$449 512MB \$649 • Supplier: Efx www.efx.com.au

This strange looking player is actually contoured to fit comfortably in your pocket, thanks to its very slim profile. With 256MB of onboard memory, you've got plenty of space for your tracks, but if this isn't the enough the clever inclusion of an SD slot makes this upgradeable.

A major problem we have with this player are the 3 plastic doors

that cover the battery and various other ports – they're just way too flimsy, and we can easily envisage them snapping off in the hands of your clumsy pals.

Other than that, it's a great player; nice sound quality, plenty of features (FM radio and voice recorder) and it looks sexy to boot.

SPECIFICATIONS

- Size:
- Weight: 36g
- Memory: Various
- Rechargeable battery: No

PCPP SCORE

Overall 3.5/5



XClef HD-500

• Price: 20GB \$589 40GB \$695 • Supplier: Mstation www.mstation.com.au

Sure this player is a brick, making it unsuitable for the upwardly mobile types, but for the capacity it's pretty damn cheap, approaching the price of flash based players. Jukeboxes usually require drivers and upload apps, so we were pleasantly surprised when this one worked without either.

Unfortunately the sound quality wasn't quite up to par – it wasn't

unpleasant, but lacked the crispness at high volumes of some of the other players.

If you're on a very tight budget, but want the mega storage space of a jukebox, this player won't disappoint. But if you can afford to spend a little extra, we'd have to suggest the iPod over the XClef.

SPECIFICATIONS

- Size: 130mm x 80mm x 20mm
- Weight: 270g
- Memory: Various
- Rechargeable battery: Yes

PCPP SCORE

Overall 4/5



RADEON 9600XT vs. GeForce FX5700 Ultra

Did Santa make the correct video card choice this Christmas? Asher Moses investigates.

Last issue saw our high-end graphics shootout, with ATI's new Radeon 9800XT battling it out against the Nvidia GeForce FX5950 for the esteemed PCPP performance crown. While the 9800XT was a slightly better product, the performance increase over the predecessors of both chipsets (the 9800 Pro and 5900 respectively) wasn't anything to write home about, as they were very much "fill in" upgrades. Such desperation to hit a tight six month product cycle seems to be a prevailing trend in today's world of PC tech, and can result in much unnecessary spending (from the consumer's perspective, of course).

However, while it's all well and good to drool over the latest and greatest in graphics technology that can often be seen gracing the hallowed pages of PCPP, this short-lived sensation soon ends when the reality sets in that, in order to purchase such a beast, a second mortgage on the house and numerous arguments with the wife are inevitably going to follow. OK, maybe we exaggerated a little on the mortgage part, but don't be

surprised if you find yourself sleeping on the couch and eating microwave dinners for at least six months post-purchase! Don't say we didn't warn you. Anyway, if the above sounds like you, don't feel ashamed, because, according to consumer buying trends, you're certainly not alone. In fact, the vast majority of video cards sales are in the mid to low end category, thus explaining why manufacturers push their budget products just as much as their high-end parts.

Therefore, I'm sure it wasn't a surprise to pick up this issue and find that we've thoughtfully catered to those stuck in the mid-range as well, with the competitors again being Nvidia and ATI - unsurprising to say the least. Nonetheless, it's time to once again hit the labs, so please feel free to join us as we endeavor to reveal who in fact is the king of this graphics duopoly.

Dude, where's my card?

The first port of call in this shootout is a review of the specifications sheet of both cards, as this allows us to predict/explain any performance anomalies seen during testing. Firstly, the 5700 Ultra is based on the NV36 GPU, with a core clock speed of 475MHz and 128MB of Samsung 2.2ns DDR2 running at 450MHz (900MHz DDR). It's interesting to note that the chipset uses the 0.13-micron process and is the first NVIDIA GPU to be fabricated at IBM. Furthermore, the 5700 Ultra, being a totally revamped chipset, includes features such as CineFX 2.0, souped up vertex shaders, and many other features held previously by the high-end FX5950 - which Nvidia claims enables it to perform 1.5x faster than the FX5600 Ultra. As you can see, although it's a budget chipset, it boasts a huge memory bandwidth of 14.4GB/sec, and the 5700 Ultra still packs plenty of punch, being more than able to keep up with the demands of today's games. Finally, it's important to note that our particular card was manufactured by Asus, and a list of distributors can be found at Asus.com.au.

On the other hand, the ATI RADEON 9600XT runs at a slightly higher core clock speed of 500MHz

(a 25% increase over the 9600 Pro), and uses the same 300MHz DDR memory seen on its predecessor. In fact, the only notable addition to the 9600XT over the 9600 Pro is the increased core clock speed, as well as ATI's OverDrive support. OverWhat? Well, to put it simply, due to the fact that the 9600XT features an on-die thermal sensor, using the latest ATI driver revision the card is able to intelligently overlock itself up to a maximum of 527MHz depending on thermal conditions. While this may be useful for those that are new to overlocking, most PCPP'ers should

SPECIAL K!

Part of the reason why the 9600XT is able to run 25% faster than the 9600 Pro is because it is based on a low-k dielectric 0.13-micron process. In layman's terms, this technology basically aids in the shielding of crosstalk in high transistor density chips, which in turns allows the core to run cooler and draw less power while at the same time maintaining a higher frequency. ATI's certainly pulling out all the stops here!

it's clear that while Nvidia has had to play catch up since its defeat to the 9600 Pro, ATI has had a fairly easy ride...

be fairly acquainted with the process since our video card overlocking guide way back in issue #76 (wow, 20 issues sure has gone by fast!), and our subsequent graphics card reviews.

Like the 9800XT, the 9600XT becomes even more tempting when one notes that it is bundled with a free copy of Half-Life 2 - a title that we're sure 99.9999% of PCPP'ers will end up purchasing regardless of whether or not it meets our exorbitant expectations.

Overall, it's clear that while Nvidia has had to play catch up since its defeat to the 9600 Pro in issue #94, ATI has had a fairly easy ride in recent months. Thus, it will be interesting to see whether or not the 9600XT, no more than a quick refresh of the 9600 Pro, is enough to retain ATI's crown.

The Method to our Madness

Our testing procedures in this shootout pretty much mirrors that of last issue's high-end rumble, with a beastly test bed consisting of a 3.2GHz (800MHz FSB) Pentium 4 processor, an Abit IS7 (i865PE) motherboard and dual sticks of

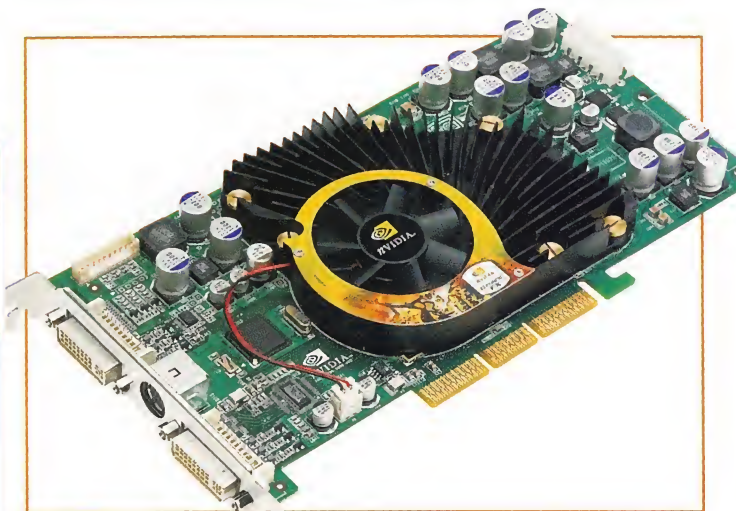
512MB OCZ DDR500 memory being adopted. Such a high-end system serves to ensure that, if anything, gaming performance will be limited by the video card and nothing else. As far as drivers are concerned, these too remained constant, with the Catalyst 3.9 and 52.16 Detonator drivers being used to test ATI and Nvidia's offerings respectively.

We also brought forth our revamped benchmarking suite for this shootout, as evaluating the gear using games released over six months ago wouldn't do any of the cards much justice at all. This includes five solid, graphics intensive applications that we believe best showcase the features of each chipset: Halo, Aquamark 3, Unreal Tournament 2003, Final Fantasy XI and Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness. As we're sure you'll agree, each of these applications are notorious for bringing even the most decked out system to its knees and are thus highly appropriate for use in this shootout.

Finally, just so you get an idea as to how these mid-range cards compare with their high-end siblings, we also threw in a 9800XT and a GeForceFX 5950 for good measure

STAY COOL, DADDY-O

Consumer demands have changed greatly in the past few years. While many users were previously more than happy to put up with loud whirring fan noises as long as it resulted in a more effective cooling solution, today people want to have their cake and eat it too. Thus, noise and cooling plays an integral role in our graphics card shootouts. The heatsink/fan combo on the 5700 Ultra is fairly low profile, not obstructing a PCI slot and being fairly silent, made possible by the cool 0.13u manufacturing process. Similarly, the 9600XT is also fairly silent and doesn't obstruct a PCI slot, again due to its 0.13u process. While you'll have to check out the overlocking section of this article to see just how well both coolers performed, as far as noise is concerned, both cards are barely audible above the many fans you may have installed in your chassis.



The Aftermath

As you can see, the results were very close indeed. In fact, aside from the FSAA/AF tests where the RADEON cards had slightly better implementations of both technologies, there was no more than a bee's pecker separating the two mainstream chipsets. Even in these AA/AF tests, the difference wasn't more than 5.2 frames at most.

Judging a book by its cover

With the performance difference between the 9600XT and 5700 Ultra being virtually negligible, image quality is obviously going to play an integral part in our analysis. As with last issue's high-end shootout, we managed to spend a good 2-3 hours with each card playing through some of the newer DirectX 9 titles such as Halo, Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness and UT2003, in order to give you an accurate assessment regarding which of the two chipsets boasts the best image quality. Coincidentally, we are also left with the same conclusions as last issue.

In regular situations with full scene anti-aliasing (FSAA) and anisotropic filtering (AF) disabled, it is literally impossible to objectively pick out any significant differences in image quality between the two cards. Both produce a superb, crisp image and, if we, as reviewers, can't find any differences when looking long and hard for over two hours, you certainly won't be able to do so whilst casually gaming.

With AA and AF enabled, however, a clear winner starts to emerge. As far as FSAA is concerned, not only does the 9600XT take less of a performance hit, but it also produces a noticeably superior image. While that's not to say that the 5700's image quality is poor, it is certainly no match for ATI's offering in this regard. On the other hand, as far as AF is

concerned, there was no discernable difference between the cards, however, with both 4xAA and 8xAF enabled, we'd have to say that the image quality on the 9600XT is noticeably better overall.

Take the chance, pump it up!

As always, our overclocking tests were conducted using the popular PowerStrip utility. In an enclosed case with stock cooling, we were able to overclock the RADEON 9600XT all the way up to 590/310MHz core/memory, while the 5700 Ultra hit a respectable 550/500MHz. Both of these overclocks are fairly impressive as far as core clock is concerned, however, we can't help but be slightly disappointed with the memory yield offered by both cards. Having said that, particularly in the case of the 9600XT, its 3.3ns memory comes fairly maxed out as it is, so these results were rather predictable. Overall, there is no clear leader as far as overclocking is concerned.

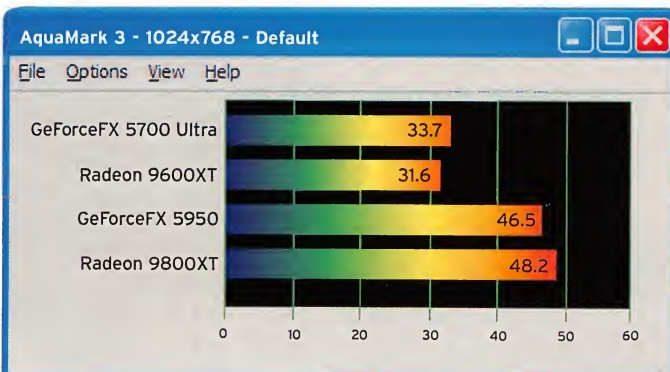
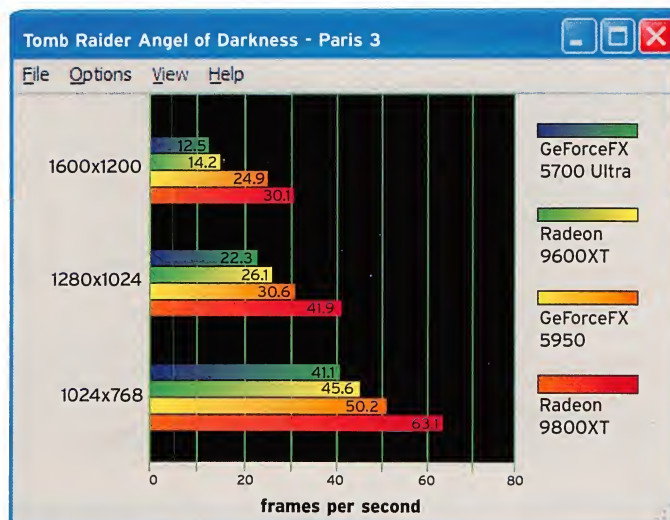
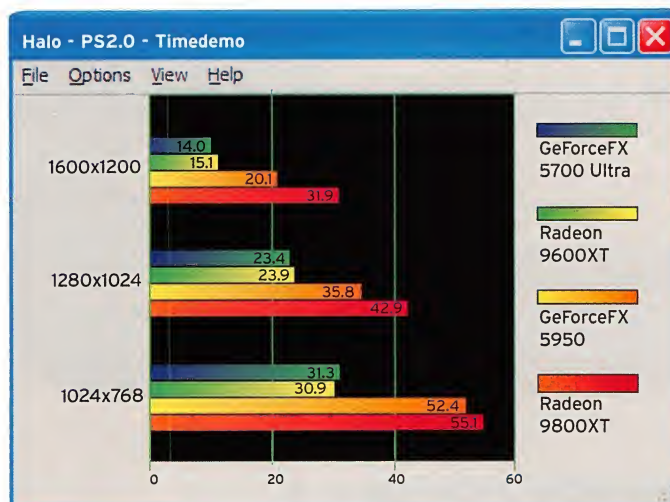
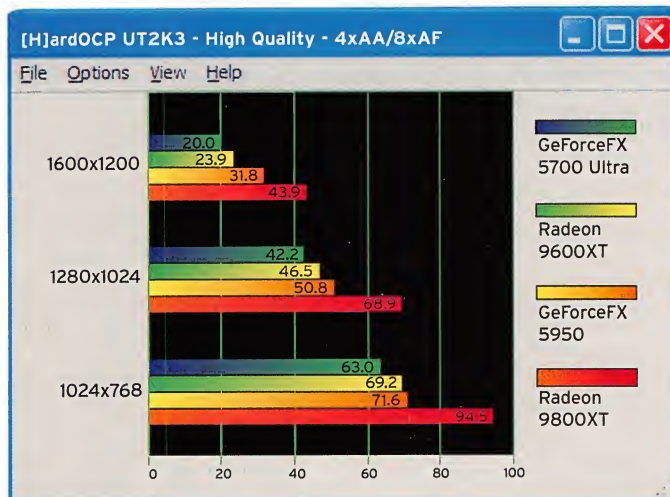
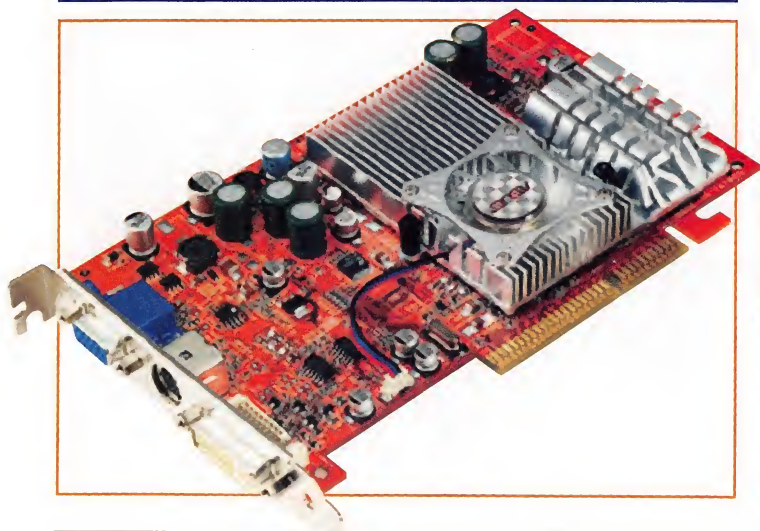
The Verdict - Although both are holiday colours, Red > Green

As the title of this section suggests, overall, we believe that the 9600XT is a slightly smarter purchase than the 5700 Ultra. While performance is virtually identical, the fact that the AA/AF implementations on the 9600XT are superior, coupled with the bundled copy of Half-Life 2 is just enough to put the ATI chipset in front. Additionally, this conclusion is only further reinforced by the fact that both cards can be had for around the same price, leaving no compelling reason to purchase the 5700 Ultra over the 9600XT. The bottom line is, while both cards would make an excellent upgrade for the mainstream gamer, if it was us, we'd go with ATI on this one.

PCPP Summary

Asher Moses

A superior AA/AF implementation and free HL2 are just enough to put the 9600XT ahead.



Creative Inspire T7700

• Price: \$299 • Distributor: Creative Labs Pty Ltd www.australia.creative.com • URL: www.australia.creative.com

The Inspire T7700 is the affordable entry product to complement the Sound Blaster Audigy 2 ZS. What you'll get in the box is one wooden enclosure subwoofer with a 6.5-inch long-throw driver and a port tube for deep bass and what amounts to three fronts, (sides and centre with tweeter and mid range drivers), and four rear/side speakers. The centre boasts 24 Watts and the remaining satellites deliver 8 Watts. The three front speakers each feature a tweeter that serves as an extension to the mid range driver, to deliver smooth and accurate highs, balanced with mid frequencies to achieve some tonal balance. The Subwoofer also contains the amplifier, connections for input from the sound card and outputs for the satellites. The port itself features a dual flared tube, which is designed to produce a better lower resonant frequency to make the bass more solid and effective.

PCPP Score

A worthwhile upgrade from a 2.1 configuration or to match a multi-channel soundcard.

89

The subwoofer is capable of maximum 24 Watts RMS. All of the satellites come with stands for either desk placement or holes in the rear for those wanting to mount satellites onto the walls. The Creative Inspire T7700 also feature Creative's proprietary CMSS upmix technology that allows you to experience realistic 7.1 surround sound with any 5.1/6.1 sound card. CMSS enhances the playback of 5.1/6.1 audio soundtracks across the full 7.1 speaker configuration.

For total control of this speaker system, the Audio Control Pod integrates the unique M-PORT

SPECIFICATIONS

- 8 Watts RMS per channel (6 channels)
- 20 Watts RMS centre speaker
- 24 Watts RMS
- Subwoofer Frequency Response: 40Hz to 20KHz
- SNR: 80dB
- Wired Audio Control Pod

for exclusive connectivity to compatible Creative audio players, and features a line-in, headphone jack, power on/off, and volume/bass controls.

Cable design is good, each set of wires are wrapped separately with centre speakers being tied with a different colour wire tie to quickly tell difference in length. Each cable is black, but the positive cable has a red band so you know exactly which one to

connect to the speaker and then run the cable back to sub, which has coded satellite position connectors. Music playback is very good and high volumes levels can be set without distortion. DVD playback is also very good in multi-channel and the surround sound for gaming provides immersion and audio cues not apparent in a 2.1 configuration.

Stuart Calvin



eAudio SHT-6B 5.1

• Price: \$179 • Distributor: SATO Technology Pty Ltd www.satotech.com.au • URL: www.exportandfactory.com

Until now, I'd never heard of the eAudio range from Areca Export & Factory Co., lately of Taiwan but they make some decent speakers for the price. The eAudio SHT-6B is a very affordable six speaker entry set to complement any 5.1 channel soundcard. What you'll get in the box is one wooden enclosure subwoofer with a 5-inch, long-throw driver, a center speaker and four satellites. The satellites are tall and stand at an appealing height to add some 'hoo-ah' to the look of the setup. All of the satellites come with stands for desk placement but they are precariously balanced. The centre delivers 15 Watts, not as much as some but still there's some good oomph and the remaining satellites deliver 10 Watts - more than some other name brands at 6-8 Watts. The centre speaker features two mid range drivers that deliver fair enough tonal quality for DVD playback. The

Subwoofer also contains the amplifier, connections for input from the sound card and outputs for the satellites. The subwoofer is capable of maximum 24 Watts RMS but I had to finely tune the setup in the mixer software to reduce air noise. The flared port itself produces a fuzzy, resonant frequency and the bass is not solid or as effective as it should be. The superb cordless remote features all the controls needed to avoid a head-bumping trip under the desk. Cable design is good, as long as you have a thorough

understanding of the Line-outs on your card. Interestingly, the speaker connections are tipped with RCA jacks for direct input to a suitable DVD player or TV but there are mini-jack adaptors for connection to the soundcard. Each cable is black, but one of the pairs has grey stripes so you know exactly how to connect to the speaker appropriately and then run the cable back to the sub which has

spring clips for bared wires. Music playback is very good but high volume levels produce distortion. DVD playback is also very good in multi-channel and the surround sound for gaming provides immersion and, of course, audio cues not apparent in a 2.1 configuration.

Stuart Calvin

SPECIFICATIONS

- Total RMS Power: 110 watts
- Frequency Response: 20Hz ~ 20KHz
- Sub Driver: 5.25"
- Drivers (per Satellite): 2" x 3"
- Centre Driver: 2" x 3" x 2"
- Cabinet materials: all wooden
- Wireless IR Remote Control - Master / Front / Rear / Centre / Subwoofer Volume, 5.1-ch, Stereo

PCPP Score

Check the street prices and grab a set for around \$130 or less.

84





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www.astrabyte.com.au
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Import, Distribution, Service



WMA11B Linksys Wireless-B Media Adapter

• Price: \$399 • Distributor: Harris Technology www.ht.com.au • URL: www.linksys.com/products

The WMA11B is a small plastic box that sits by your home stereo or television and connects via S-Video and RCA sockets using standard electronics cables. It sits between the video and sound output of your choice and the rest of the network. In many ways it's just another network device that seamlessly integrates with a network. It connects to a LAN (your home network) by the Wireless-B (802.11b) wireless networking standard, or if you prefer, a standard 10/100 Ethernet cabling. The WMA11B lets you take the digital music and pictures stored on your computer to your Home Entertainment Centre (or just the TV), with or without running cables through the house. In this way, the Media Adapter displays your digital pictures on a TV and your digital music collection can be played through your stereo system without the need for an additional multimedia PC. You can use the remote to browse your MP3 or

WMA formatted music collection by title, artist, genre, folder, or playlist. Choose the music you want, and let the Wireless-B Media Adapter play it through your stereo system. You can even let music play in the background while you browse your pictures. Using the remote and the simple menus on your TV, you can browse through the digital pictures on your computer by folder, filename, or

thumbnail. You can view pictures one at a time, or watch an automatically created slideshow of all the pictures in a given folder. The Media Adapter supports four popular picture formats: JPG, GIF, TIF and BMP. The remote has a Zoom button to get a close-up of the details in your pictures. In this version, the Media Adaptor won't connect to shared folders or mapped network drives which means that any music or

photographs will have to be on the PC that runs the WMA11B software. It also won't play streaming video. For those of us part or most of the way to a PC based multimedia setup, with pics, songs and movies spread over more than one PC, it may not entirely suit. However, it does what it's advertised to do very well.

Stuart Calvin

SPECIFICATIONS

- Supports MP3 and WMA audio and M3U/ASX playlist formats
- supports JPG, GIF, TIF and BMP image formats
- S-Video and composite video output
- 128-bit WEP encryption security
- RCA connectors for stereo output
- 802.11b (2.4GHz) wireless standard (up to 11Mbps data transfer)
- J-45 10/100Mbps Ethernet cable connection
- 1 year warranty

PCPP Score

Somewhat pricey but still a versatile substitute for anyone lacking a dedicated multimedia computer.

90



Mission3D Photo3D 303

• Price: \$US129 • Distributor: Mission3D www.photo3d.us • URL: n/a • Phone: 1800 531 3378

Contrary to what Mission3D claims, 3D photography has been around for about as long as digital cameras themselves. Traditionally, taking 3D photographs of still objects has been achieved by simply taking two pictures, each from a different horizontal angle, and merging them together. However, during this process the field of view and exposure levels must remain identical, which can be fairly difficult and time consuming to achieve for even the most confident photography graduate. Enter the Photo3D 303.

Put simply, the Photo3D 303 is a tripod with a sliding mounting plate that attaches to your camera. Obviously, the mounting plate needs to be level and to achieve this Mission3D has thoughtfully included a "spirit level" device in order to make your shots as precise as possible. Also of note is that the tripod itself is plastic, light-weight and fairly flimsy, however, provided that you don't have an

overly large camera, this shouldn't be too big an issue. Furthermore, the tripod can also be folded into a neat little package - ideal for the photographer that is constantly on the move.

Once you've taken your pictures, simply load up the Photo3D Mixer, select your left and right images (they have to be either BMP or JPG), tweak the brightness and contrast levels, and the software will do the rest for you. You are then able to email these images to a friend (Mission3D will even send paper 3D glasses out to up to five of your friends to encourage this form of free advertising), print them out or, obviously, save them to your hard drive. Overall, the Photo3D Mixer is a very intuitive piece of software, and, aside from your regular anaglyphic images it also supports interlaced 3D, side-by-side 3D (ala your baby brother/sister's View Master) and cross-eyed imaging.

Ever seen a 3D film at the Imax cinema in Darling Harbour, Sydney? If so, then you should be

fairly well acquainted with the way in which this device works, as it's bundled with a few sets of green/blue lensed anaglyph glasses that are required in order to visualise the actual 3D effect. Performance-wise, we had no real complaints regarding this product, and provided that you follow the included documentation correctly, you will get the desired 3D effects without issue.

At this point in time the Photo3D product can only be purchased from Mission3D's online store,

setting you back a handsome \$US129. As I'm sure you'll agree, this is not cheap at all, and the fact that products with the same features can be had for much less from your local photography store leaves little reason to make such a purchase. Heck, there's even an abundance of freeware anaglyph making software packages online. The bottom line is, although the Photo3D 303 is a solid, easy to use product in its own right, its high price leaves us no choice but to suggest that you give this one a miss.

Asher Moses

PCPP Score

A great product let down by an unusually high price. Give this one a miss, folks.

59



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SL-865PE-L

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- FSB *1200 / 800 Mhz (*Overclocking)
- 4 Dual Channel DDR 400/333 SDRAM
- AGP 8X/4X
- UATA-133 IDE & Serial ATA
- Integrated LAN function
- Integrated 6-Channel AC'97 Audio
- 8 x USB2.0
- BIOS Vcore Setting & FSB Setting
- BIOS AGP & DIMM Voltage Setting
- Hyper Threading Technology
- Soltek UV & MBA Technology

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SL-87CW-FL

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- Integrated IEEE1394
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The specification and pictures are subject to change without notice.



Creative Prodikeys DM

• Price: \$176 • Distributor: Creative Labs Pty Ltd • URL: www.prodikeys.com/

Feeling creative urges that aren't satisfied by building web pages? The Creative Prodikeys DM might be just the thing for you. This black keyboard has a handy rest for your wrists, which clips off to reveal a 37 note half-size music keyboard. The unit has a PS/2 plug but the keyboard is in fact a MIDI controller that provides a fair bit of entertainment even for the musically challenged.

Installation is straightforward and the CD installs a lot of MIDI samples, although I was able to use existing samples from my Audigy 2 installation as well. The samples are high quality with little evidence of "micky-mousing" at the ends of the keyboard. In addition to the standard music and PC keys there are volume and pitch-bend wheels, media player controls, programmable buttons and internet link buttons. Kicking into music mode requires pressing the music button, and you're away!

There are several modes of

play as well as playing the keyboard normally. There are installed songs (and more downloadable) that allow you to choose a drum track, chord sequences, musical stabs, and all you do is plink away, as the keyboard will only play notes in the pentatonic scale of the song. If that sounds technical, it's quite easy in real life. Other modes include learning, auto-chords and fun tunes. They're all entertaining

SPECIFICATIONS

- IBM compatible PS/2 keyboard
- 37 half size key touch sensitive MIDI keyboard
- 104 note range
- 128 general midi instruments
- 100 rhythms

SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS

- Windows 98 SE, ME, 2000, XP
- Pentium 233 MHz
- 128 MB RAM
- 360 MB disc space
- Sound card or on-board
- Speakers or headphones

in different ways, but some will appeal more than others.

There are 128 general midi sounds and effects and 10 categories of rhythms, and you might want a few more than are available. The web site is active and new tunes and rhythms are added regularly (although they're all more than 6 MB for those on dialup). It sounds great through a good sound system, and you can record your creations to MP3, WAV or MIDI. The keys are touch sensitive and if you run out of room with 37 keys you can hit the

octave shift hardware buttons to gain 104 notes.

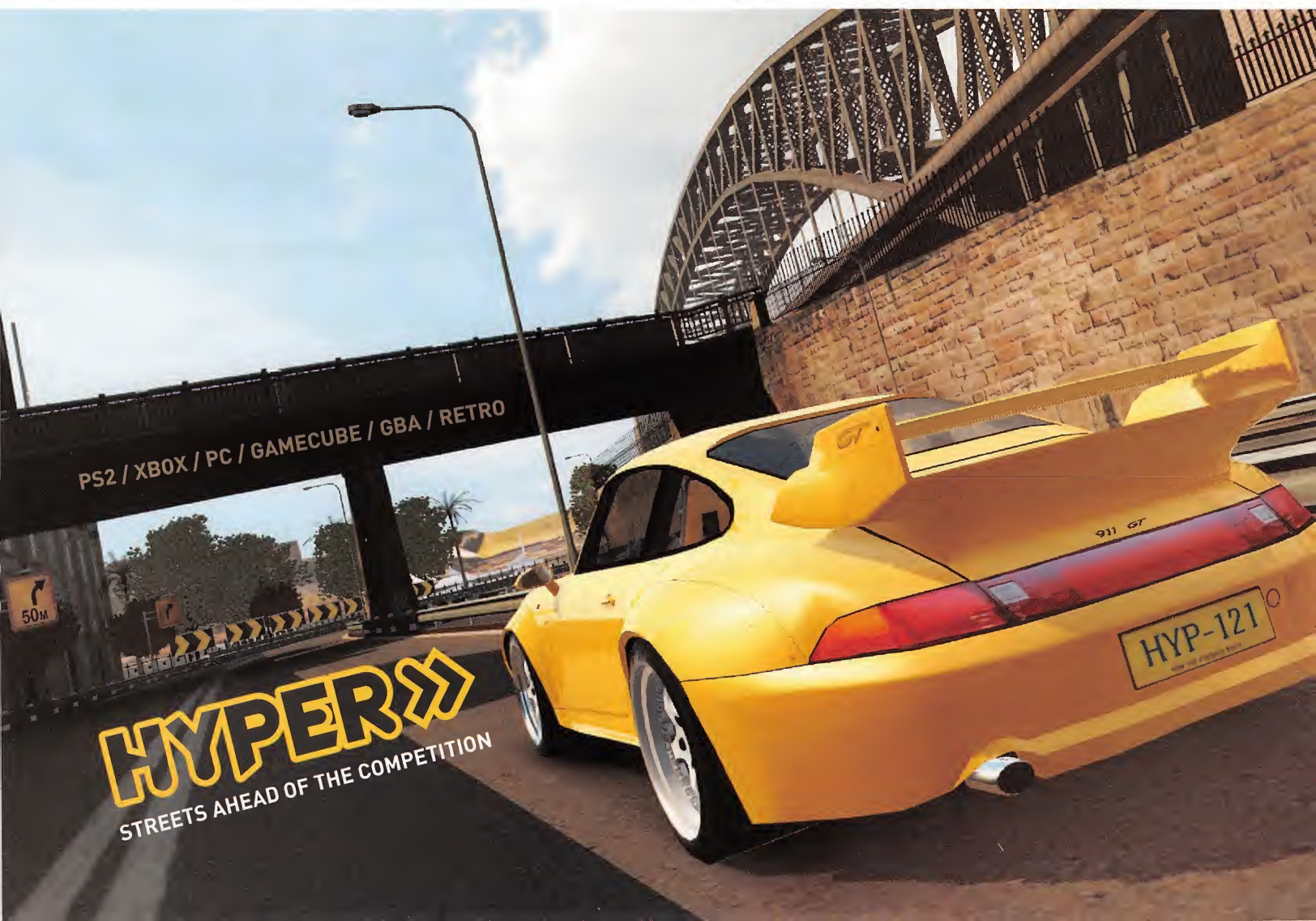
The PC keyboard has a fairly average feel to it – not my favourite but quite usable. The hardware keys can be reprogrammed to local applications or URLs. In all, this is a fun keyboard for those without room for a full size 88 key model or who just want to tinker. Serious musicians probably will look elsewhere unless they just want a scratchpad.

Andrew Calvin

PCPP Score

Fun distraction from study, with a usable PC keyboard too.

75



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While it would make our jobs a heck of a lot easier if we could review hardware based on the shininess of the packaging it arrives in, we're pretty sure our beloved readers are a little more interested in how the hardware actually performs. Which is why we have the PC PowerPlay PowerTools - batteries not included.

If you're anything like us, you probably don't give a rat's arse if Word will open three seconds faster on the new

Pentium 64, or if you can compress a zip file more speedily using DDR6-8000 memory. Nope, this is PowerPlay, so it's all about how well your games will perform.

Our PowerTools are broken into two categories, videocard tests and CPU/motherboard/memory tests, and you'll notice that most of these are based on real world game engines. We spoke to Intel, AMD, NVIDIA and ATI about which games to use to benchmark our hardware, and

after tossing out their biased recommendations settled on the following applications for the majority of our tests. Of course, every now and then a unique piece of hardware will arrive that can't be tested properly using these applications, and in these circumstances we'll use the most appropriate benchmarking software.

We also use test benches (a fancy way of saying a PC outside of a case, waiting to electrocute unsuspecting

hardware newbs), standardised hardware platforms that ensure our benchmark results can be compared to each other month after month. As better benchmarks are released, we'll strive to include these in the PowerTools section, and with the imminent release of a few big name DX9 titles, you'll see a couple of changes over the coming months. But until then, here are the benchmarks that we'll be using to put new hardware through its paces.

CPU Tests

3D Mark03 CPU test

Nobody can deny that this CPU test is a nice way to give processors a thorough workout. And hey, it's easy to use and free - 'nuff said.

Jedi Knight 2

We couldn't ignore a benchmark that includes lightsabres. We run this test at low resolution (640x480), with texture details lowered, and geometry details maxed out.

[H]ardOCP Unreal Tournament 2003 test 2.1

We run the CPU test of this benchmark at low resolution, and it's one of the finest indicators of CPU performance available.

Comanche 4

It sucked as a game, but as a CPU/motherboard/memory benchmark this is a beauty. We run at 640x480 resolution to make sure it's the CPU that's carrying the load.

Videocard tests Quake 3 Arena v1.32

This OpenGL golden oldie is the

most prolific game benchmark around. We run this test at 1024x768, 1280x1024 and 1600x1200, with all graphics settings at their highest.

3DMark2001 SE v330

An excellent DirectX 8.1 benchmark, we're still waiting for games to look this bloody good. Unlike its newer sibling, 2001SE doesn't have a reputation for being incredibly biased. We run this at the same resolutions as the Q3A test.

Serious Sam: Jaguar Demo

Throw dozens of detailed enemies into a massive, gorgeous level and you've got a benchmark that is guaranteed to make your videocard howl in pain. Once again, we test at the same resolutions as the Q3A test.

[H]ardOCP Unreal Tournament 2003 test

Crank up the resolution and set the benchmark to High Quality mode, and you've got a test that will bring both ATI and NVIDIA products to their knees. This is also the test that we use for anisotropic filtering and anti-aliasing tests, at a resolution of 1280 x 1024.

TEST BENCHES

Intel Test Bench (x2) Intel Pentium 4 2.6C

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AMD Test Bench (x1) AMD Athlon XP 2600+

HIS RADEON 9700 PRO
www.akatech.com.au
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Mitsubishi Mitsubishi Diamond
View 2115e 21" monitor
www.mitsubishi.com
Microsoft multimedia keyboard
and optical mouse
www.microsoft.com.au
Windows XP Professional
www.microsoft.com.au

Image Quality testing:

We also use a Sony G520 21" CRT monitor for the image quality testing of video cards.



www.akatech.com.au



www.corsairmicro.com



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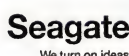
www.intel.com



www.abit.com.tw



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www.seagate.com



www.hightech.com.hk



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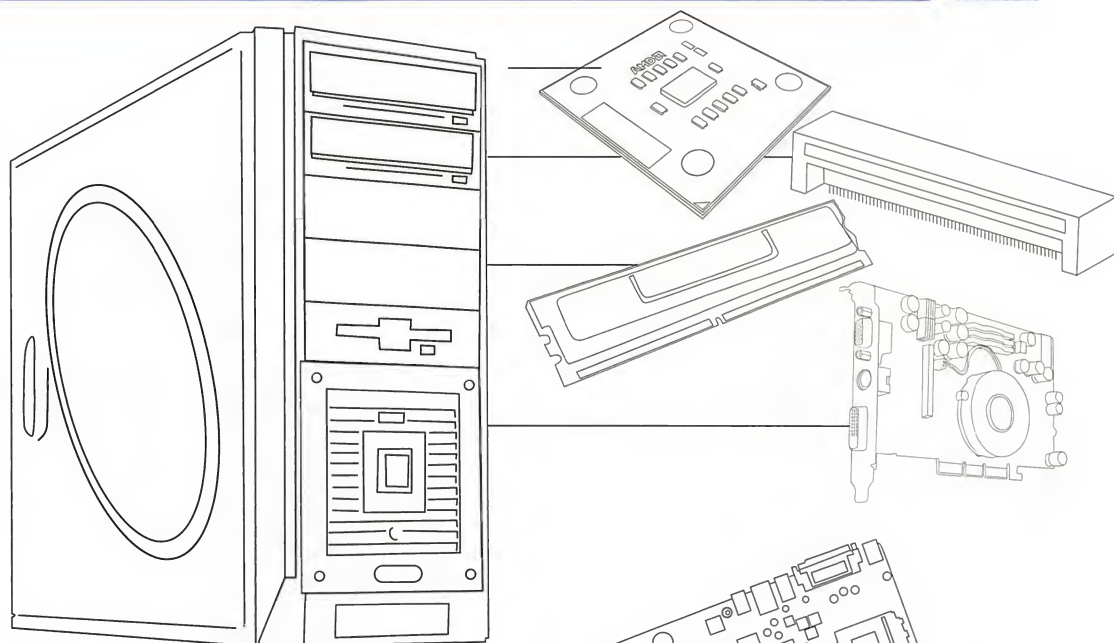
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Asher Moses

Decrypt

Let's face it. For the average consumer, reading a PCPP hardware review, particularly one featuring a motherboard or a piece of audio-visual equipment, is a fairly daunting affair. Although we endeavor to provide thorough explanations of most of the more complex jargon used, the seemingly simpler terms are often left as assumed knowledge due to our stringent word limits. A particular area that we feel has been kept in the dark for some time now is one broadly labeled as external connections, part of which even we get confused by, for example, when a product hits the labs with a specifications sheet boasting a plethora of newfangled port and interface technologies. Thus, it was only logical for this month's Decrypt to be based around this topic, so pull up a stool and dig in!



3.5mm Minijack: One of the most common connection types, used primarily as an audio output for speakers, headphones and microphones, etc.



Auxiliary: An output used to route an audio signal to an external device.



Bluetooth: Wireless technology that allows computing devices to transmit data between each

other. These are particularly common with mobile phones and PDAs, due to its short range of just 30 feet.



Composite Video: An ageing video signal standard, often used on VCR and DVD players, that is used for video in/out on many graphics cards. It combines colour, brightness and synchronization information into a single "composite" signal. This has since been phased out by S-Video due to its relatively poor image quality.



DVI (Digital Video Interface): A connector found on most modern video cards that was created to accommodate analog and digital monitors with a single connector. This standard will eventually replace VGA.



Ethernet: A LAN connection that is available in a variety of speeds.



Headphone Jack: Output on a system which allows for the music to be heard through headphones.



IEEE 1394: Also known as FireWire, IEEE1394 is a high speed serial bus that can transfer data at up to 800Mb/sec, and, like USB, allows you to add peripheral devices to your computer with ease.



IR (Infra-Red): A type of wireless transmission using infrared light waves, often utilized by remote control devices and notebook computers.



Parallel Port: An interface capable of transferring more than one bit of data simultaneously, commonly used with external devices such as printers and scanners.



PS/2: A type of port developed by IBM for connecting a mouse or keyboard to a PC. The PS/2 port supports a mini DIN plug containing just 6 pins. PS/2 ports are present on all modern PCs (except a couple of flavours of ABIT motherboards).



RCA: By far the most common audio connector. Used for every sort of analog input and output, these come in color-coded pairs (usually red for right audio and black or white for left

audio). Also used for composite-video (coded yellow) and coaxial digital audio cables. "Coaxial" means the signal carrier and its shield are aligned along the same axis (generally a signal wire runs down the middle of a cylindrical shield). First used to connect early electronic record players to radios and still sometimes called "phone jacks."



SCSI: Small Computer Systems Interface, pronounced "scuzzy". A device independent interface used for a wide range of peripherals, of a very high speed.



Serial Port: A port, or interface, that can be used for serial communication, in which only 1 bit is transmitted at a time. While commonly utilized by modems, printers and even mice, this standard is just about phased out.



S/PDIF (Sony/Phillips Digital Interface): The current standard for digital connection to consumer audio devices.



S-Video: The new and improved version of composite, "Super-Video" transmits data as two channels, colour and brightness, and results in a crisper, more detailed image.



USB 2.0 (Universal Serial Bus

version 2): A plug and play standard that can transmit data at up to 480MB/sec. It's also currently the most common standard used with mice, keyboards, scanners, digital cameras and other external devices sporting PC connectivity. Looks identical to slower USB 1.1 connections, and is backwards compatible.



Y-Cable: Most computers have only one monitor output. Subsequently, a

special cable is necessary to split the monitor signal so it will work simultaneously with both a monitor and a projector.



VGA/SVGA: The standard 15-pin connector for linking a monitor

to a computer, it carries the three primary colors (red, green, and blue, or RGB) plus horizontal and vertical synchronization signals. The name stands for (Super) Video Graphics Array.

THE BEAST



In association with Altech Computers

Welcome to PowerPlay's Beast page, where we give you the blueprints for three very different PCs, each catering to a different wallet thickness.

For those with extra phat, well padded money holders, look no further than the Beast. You'll be hard pressed to find a faster machine, but you'll pay through the nose for the privilege. Then there's the Mutant, for those who don't mind a bit of tinkering and overclocking. It offers the best balance between price and performance. Finally we have the Beastie. Cheap it may be, but slow it certainly is not.



CPU, MEMORY AND MOTHERBOARD

AMD Athlon FX-51 CPU

Goodbye Intel, hello AMD. The FX-51 is bloody expensive, but the fact that it's the fastest gaming processor around meant we had no choice but to fit out The Beast with this speed demon.

\$1423 www.amd.com



Asus SK8N

Yep, it's one incredibly expensive motherboard, but that's what you have to put up with when you want the best of the best. At least you'll know that it's of the highest quality.

\$457 www.abit.com.tw



1GB Corsair TWINX-3200 ECC Registered

The FX-51 demands only the finest in registered memory, and a Gig of the stuff for a mere \$630 is quite simply a bargain. It's Corsair as well, so it must be pretty good, right?

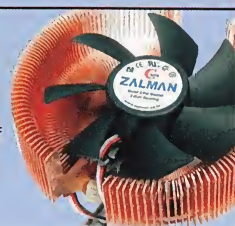
\$630 www.corsairmemory.com



Zalman 7000A-Cu

The Beast is so chunky, so wild and untameable that you need a real man's cooler stuck on the top of your mighty CPU. Zalman delivers, offering a chunk of metal that performs well and isn't too screamingly loud.

\$82 www.zalman.co.kr



Antec TruePower 550W

With 550 watts of blistering power you can plug in as many crazy case fans, cooling systems and front-mounted LCD panels as you like and still enjoy smooth, reliable gaming.

\$233 www.antec-inc.com



VIDEO, AUDIO AND CONNECTIVITY

GeCube RADEON 9800XT PRO 256MB

With more onboard memory than some people's whole PC, the latest in the RADEON family will get your FSAA performance up and keep it up.

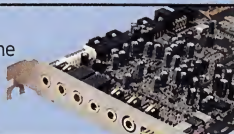
\$890 www.gigacube.com.tw



Creative Soundblaster Audigy 2 Platinum

The most powerful consumer-level soundcard on the market. Support for every sound format, including Dolby 6.1 surround.

\$415 australia.creative.com



Creative Inspire 6600 6.1

Let your soundcard handle all the decoding and plug these cheap but powerful speakers into the ports on the back. An extra rear channel beefs your gaming surround!

\$264 australia.creative.com



STORAGE AND OPTICAL

Sony DRU510A DVD +/- R/RW

Almost but not quite cheap enough for mere mortals to own, this Sony drive will burn DVDs and CDs at 4X and 24X respectively - tasty!

\$413 www.sony.com.au



Samsung 816BRPS 16x DVD-ROM

It's straight up and down, it's cheap, it's fast, it works well and you need it to copy - sorry, back up - DVDs using your nifty writer.

\$63 www.samsung.com.au



2x Seagate 120GB Serial ATA in RAID 0

Thanks to the IC7-G's support for Serial ATA RAID, you can run your 120GB in super-fast RAID 0 mode for even quicker load times - and to be damn cool too, of course.

\$518 www.seagate.com

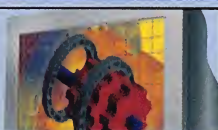


DISPLAY, INPUT AND COSMETICS

21" Sony FD Trinitron G520

Until large LCD catches up with small LCD the Beast will stick with dependable, mature, established CRT. And the G520 is one of the best in the business.

\$1960 www.sony.com.au



Antec PlusView 100AMG

It may not be the Rolls Royce of cases but it's roomy, has a built in side window and it has all of Antec's various quick access features. Take note, Lian-Li.

\$171 www.antec-inc.com



Logitech Elite Black

Smooth mechanism, funky styling and support for both PS/2 and USB make this keyboard the right choice. Real men use ergonomic keyboards though, don't forget.

\$88 www.logitech.com



Logitech MX700 wireless mouse.

Normally we wouldn't recommend a wireless mouse for gaming, but the MX700 is an exception due to its high refresh rate.

\$169 www.logitech.com



BEAST VALUE:

\$7776

THE MUTANT

Thanks to the popularity of overclocking and tweaking, we've included this machine to show you exactly what you can get away with for not much outlay. Tweaked to within an inch of its life, this is the machine we DO own, versus the Beast, which is the machine we'd like to be able to AFFORD to own.

Intel P4 2.6GHz "C" at 3.3GHz

Truly the most overclockable of all modern CPUs, the 2.6C can be run at a staggering 800MHz over its stock speed. With the standard Intel HSF. Now that's value. \$380 www.intel.com



Abit A17

An 865PE based mobo from Abit, the A17 has a very handy feature in that you can overclock your system directly from the Windows desktop. Which means you needn't delve into the confusing BIOS options ever again. \$231 www.abit.com.tw



Logitech Elite Black keyboard and MX700 mouse

If it's good enough for the Beast, it's good enough for the Mutant. Sure, both of these components aren't exactly cheap, but you can't skimp on the interface between you and your box of love. And for a wireless mouse, the MX700 is a ripper. \$257 www.logitech.com.au



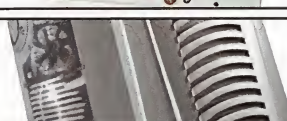
Antec TrueControl 550W

What could be groovier than a PSU that comes with a 5.25" front plate with dials and knobs for controlling fan speed plastered all over it? Nothing, that's what. \$229 www.antec-inc.com



Antec PlusView 1000AMG

What's good enough for the Beast is good enough for the Mutant, especially where the price is right. And with this machine, you'll definitely make the most of the side window. \$171 www.antec-inc.com



512MB Corsair TWINX-3200LL

Ah the half-gig sweet spot, is there nothing finer? This RAM is beefy enough to support a bit of tweaking, so perhaps you can drag a little extra performance out of it? \$297 www.corsairmemory.com



GeCube RADEON 9800 PRO 128MB

Amusingly, the video card is the single most expensive component of the Mutant. It's hard to believe that you can now get a RADEON 9800 PRO for a mere \$645, considering just how blazingly fast this video card is. \$645 www.gigacube.com.tw



Zalman VGA Heatpipe Cooler 80C-HP

Bolt this mighty thing to your video card, attach the included fan, and who knows what insane core speeds you can achieve? \$60 www.zalman.co.kr



120GB Seagate IDE

The first upgrade HDD I ever bought was 6GB and cost \$447. So this is pretty damn cheap. Only standard IDE, but at this price we can't complain. \$174 www.seagate.com



Creative SB Audigy

Lacks a few of the features found on the Audigy 2, but only the ones that don't really have much effect on gaming. There's a lot of soundcard here for not much cost. \$159 australia.creative.com



Creative Inspire 6.1 6600

They're so cheap they're good enough for the Mutant too. No decoder, no difficult optical inputs, just ordinary wires plugging in to a set of extraordinary speakers. \$264 australia.creative.com



Samsung 816BPRS 16x DVD-ROM

Same as the Beast, this drive is fast, dependable and has a slightly funkier facade than most of the beige monstrosities currently available. \$63 www.samsung.com.au



Samsung 252BRNS 52x24x52 CD-RW

Wow, these things sure got cheap didn't they? Burn CDs in hardly any time at all thanks to 52x writing. Backup all your digital LAN shots for posterity. Pose nude... no wait, don't. \$70 www.samsung.com.au



19" Samsung 995 Dynafiat

Cheaper than the video card but still a lot of sleek, flat monitor. Nineteen inches is pretty much the minimum for decent gaming, and we can't wait until a 16ms LCD this big costs this much. \$522 www.samsung.com.au



4x Antec USB Light Sticks

Pep up the Mutant with a few light sticks. Stick 'em on the monitor, in the case, wherever you like. USB powered and respond to sound - clap on, clap off! Other cosmetic additions to the Creature are limited only by your imagination. \$132 www.antec-inc.com



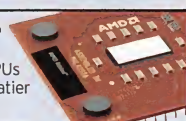
MUTANT VALUE: \$3654

the beastie

The cheapest but worthiest PC of all, the Beastie is for all of use who need gaming, the web and to generally have fun without worrying about overclocking or our bank account.

AMD -Athon XP 2500+ Barton

The cheapest CPUs keep getting meatier and meatier \$163 www.amd.com



Abit NF7

nForce2 is good and this implementation of it is even better www.abit.com.tw \$150



Antec Lanboy

Includes a 350W power supply, window and carry strap. \$185 www.antec-inc.com



512MB Corsair PC-3200

A budget PC with half a gig of RAM. All praise the open market. \$199 www.corsairmemory.com



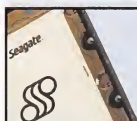
GeCube RADEON 9800

Yes, a 9800 in a budget system. Holy shit batman. \$484 www.gigacube.com.tw



60GB Seagate IDE

Plenty of room for not much cash. Dependable and reliable. \$149 www.seagate.com



Creative Inspire 2400 2.1

Plug 'em in to the nForce2's onboard sound and it's MP3-tastic! \$90 australia.creative.com



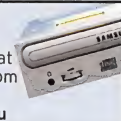
Samsung 816BPRS 16x DVD-ROM

Good enough for all the PCs on this page, swift and reliable. \$73 www.samsung.com.au



Samsung 252BRNS 52x24x52 CD-RW

Cheap, fast, reliable, what more could you want from a CD-RW? \$70 www.samsung.com.au



17" Samsung SyncMaster 753S

To think flat screen 17" monitors were once worth \$800. I love the future. \$235 www.samsung.com.au



KME Wireless Keyboard and Mouse

A sleek combo, wire free for mad ranting around the room after losing at CS \$64 www.kmepc.com

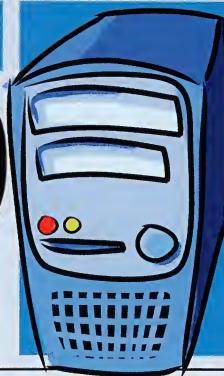


beastie value: \$1862

So, you want one of these three fine beasts? Luckily, all of these components are available at **Altech Computers** www.altech.com.au 02 9735 5655



SETUP



WRITE TO SETUP AT:

Setup
PC Powerplay
78 Renwick St
Redfern
NSW 2016

setup@pcpowerplay.com.au

NAUGHTY CHIEF

Q I have a DX8 compliant MX460 video card with T&L. Halo: Combat Evolved recognises my card, but doesn't act accordingly. I'm unable to run it in anything but the fixed function card mode. I've consulted the Halo readme, Microsoft Halo PC technical and performance FAQ, various other unofficial Halo FAQs, hit the forums and asked mates, but I can't find an answer to my problem. The manual says to add an extension to the Halo command line: "-use14" (or) "-use11". Doing this should force Halo to run in either the DX8 1.4 or 1.1 pixel shaders mode, but it doesn't work. The manual says that if this happens it means that your card is not 1.4 or 1.1 compatible, but I'm positive that my card is AT LEAST a 1.1 compatible card. Halo in fixed function card mode is incredibly ugly, shadows and specular options are completely absent, and comes nowhere near to doing justice to my PC's beastliness. I refuse to touch it till I get it running at optimum eye candy state, the sooner the better, 'cause word on the street is Halo is pretty good. I also might add that I've got the latest version of DirectX, the latest NVIDIA Detonators. And am running Halo in it's out-of-the-box version. If this helps I've added my computer's specifications. My specs: 256MB (2100) DDR RAM; 1.6 Pentium 4; SoundBlaster live! 5.1; GA-8SIML (SiS); WinXP with no service packs installed.

Sans

A Bad luck. While the MX460 (NV17) is a Vertex Shader 1.1 (limited) it's a Pixel Shader 'nuthin'. The GeForce 4 MX460 is a DX7 compliant adaptor but 'partially' supports DX8 (vertex shader 1.1) and even this assertion is open to argument. You will hear and read stuff that says that the 460 is definitely DX8 - sorry, not so. Compared to the Ti range, the MX range lost not only half of the pixel pipelines (2 of 4), but also the pixel shaders block, 3-



level anisotropy and EMBM support. The nFinite FX II engine is basically used to describe NVIDIA's Pixel Shaders and Vertex Shaders. The nFinite FX II dual vertex processing pipes in the MX range have been replaced by a vertex shader "assist" processing unit, which works in conjunction with the CPU to carry out vertex shader operations, hence the limited feature. The pixel shader hardware was also lifted from the GF4 MX range, which reduces the transistor count and cost considerably. Still present in the MX however is a full-fledged hardware T&L engine, so traditional geometry performance is still respectable. While the idea of the MX440 was clear, the idea of an MX460 is inexplicable.

WHICH CARD?

Q I have an AMD Athlon XP2200+, a Gigabyte K7 Triton motherboard with 256MB PC2700 and an XFX 64MB MX440. I'm going to upgrade my graphics card to a 256MB ProLink FX5600, another stick of RAM and a SoundBlaster Live Vibra 128-bit. Is this a wise decision or should I get an ATI card?

Ryan Irvine

A Compare the price of an FX5600 Ultra (NV31) at \$225 with a 256MB 9600 Pro at \$260. ATI's anti-aliasing and anisotropic filtering is superior to NVIDIA. The ATI will run better at higher AA and AF settings. The 9600 Pro will shortly be replaced by the 9600 XT (RV260), so have a think about that.

2.4C BLISS

Q I would like to beef up my computer but I don't have a lot of the folding stuff. My computer is an 800MHz FSB P4-2.4 on a GA-8IPE1000 Pro with 512MB PC2700 and a Ti4200 graphics card. How much can I O/C my CPU without decreasing its life? Is my motherboard a good one for O/C? Is an after market fan a good idea? Also I have a cheap and tacky case with a cheap and zappy PSU. Would this affect the performance at all?

DREW BOY

I don't see anything wrong here. Your motherboard is suitable for O/C but you may have to press Ctrl + F1 at the BIOS main menu to access the advanced options. You can try winding your FSB up to 1000MHz or more in small increments. Stock Intel fans are A-OK for O/C. The 2.4C is a tough puppy, that's for sure, so should overclock to 3GHz at least.

WHICH CARD?

Q I have an AMD Athlon XP2400+, a GA-7VA with 256MB of Kingmax PC3200, a PCI PowerColor RV25P-B3 ATI Radeon with 64MB DDR RAM running Catalyst 3.8 drivers. The weak point is, of course, the video card squeezing out only 3512 3D marks. I want to upgrade and I'd like a Ti4200 because the

FX5200/5600s suck and the 5900s and 9600/9800 PROs are too expensive. I've narrowed it down to four Ti4200 choices as these are the only ones still available in New Zealand that are within my price range. All are within \$15 of each other (between NZD \$230-\$245). The problem is I don't know which is the best, I've had nothing to do with Pine, S-Media and Legend products and I'd go with the Gainward card except it only has 64MB of RAM. I can find no reviews or benchmarks for these cards so I need your help. Low frame rates are killing me.

Andrew Pickering

A There's nothing shabby about a 64MB Ti4200 per se, but vendor implementations of the GPU differ - some good, some bad. Gainward produce reliable products and 64MB is not the end of the world. The other vendors may be a gamble but 128MB is now better than 64MB. DirectX v-9 games are filtering out onto the



If you want to beef up
your PC, strap horns to it

streets and will be the standard in 12 months. I wouldn't agree that the FX5600 sucks and if the price is right, grab one.

MIA

Q My CD-ROM and burner are missing from Windows and I get an Error 39.

Dangerous Dave

A Some third-party CD-writing software products such as Easy CD Creator and Nero add their own registry filter values or overwrite the UpperFilters or LowerFilters value in the registry.

STU'S TIP!

Some Nero Burning ROM users are experiencing reboots when trying to rip an audio CD. Strangely, the reboots are on every second CD rip. After each eject and insertion of another or even the same CD, and then going through each step of ripping the CD to the hard-drive, the PC just reboots when you click the "GO" button. This is a problem with Autoplay. Click Start/Run, type gpedit.msc and go to User Configuration/Administrative Templates/System/Turn off Autoplay > and change to Enable.



Make sure that you perform a backup of your registry before making any changes. Fire up regedit.exe and locate the UpperFilters value under the following key in the registry:

HKEY_LOCAL_MACHINE\SYSTEM\CurrentControlSet\Control\Class\{4D36E965-E325-11CE-BFC1-08002BE10318}

On the Edit menu, click Delete, and then click OK. Locate the LowerFilters value under the same key in the registry:

HKEY_LOCAL_MACHINE\SYSTEM\CurrentControlSet\Control\Class\{4D36E965-E325-11CE-BFC1-08002BE10318}

On the Edit menu, click Delete, and then click OK. Quit Registry Editor and reboot. After you remove the UpperFilters and LowerFilters values, you may notice lost functionality in a particular CD recording software program and you may need to reinstall that software.

SENTIENT PC

Q I have an MSI K7N2 Delta motherboard, WinXP SP1 and all the critical updates. No matter what I do, my computer won't turn off. It goes to the screen where it says it's now safe to turn off your computer, but I have to push the button to turn it off. I've tried the power management option in Windows, looked in the BIOS, updated drivers. Maybe I just plugged the wires in wrong from the case switch to the motherboard. I don't know....please help!

Damien

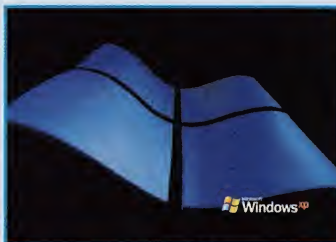
A This issue is covered in Microsoft Knowledge Base Article 810903. Open up [http://support.microsoft.com/default.aspx?scid=fb;\[LN\];kbjump](http://support.microsoft.com/default.aspx?scid=fb;[LN];kbjump) and plug in that Article number. There are generally four reasons why this happens.

1) Your computer supports the Advanced Power Management (APM) feature, but the Advanced Configuration and Power Interface-compliant (ACPI) BIOS is not configured correctly to allow the operating system to turn off the power supply. 2) During an upgrade of the operating system, Windows

doesn't detect that the computer is ACPI-compliant.

3) A device driver or service is installed on your computer that is preventing the computer from correctly shutting down.

4) Your computer is not ACPI-compliant. You can pretty much discount 2) and 4) so to fix the likely source of the problem, first check XP's settings in the Power Options Control Panel, again. Select the APM tab (if you see one), and "Enable Advanced Power Management support." This usually fixes the problem. If you don't have an APM tab to view or shutdown doesn't work properly once you enable APM support, you may need to reinvestigate your system's BIOS settings and installed software. Outdated Logitech mouse drivers Adaptec/Roxio software and Zone Alarm are known to conflict with APM. Update your software if it's installed. Otherwise, check your motherboard manual or MSI's web site for the proper energy management/power control settings to enable ACPI and APM.



FIREWALL WOES

Q About your article on p32 of PCPP #93, if the Firewall in WinXP Pro was fully utilised (every box ticked), would this slow down internet gaming? If so, just which boxes should be ticked to afford some protection and still maintain fast gaming?

Ian Burrough

A First thing, if you're on broadband, is to get hold of a hardware firewall. May I suggest the Netgear FR114P? Secondly, if you're on dial-up, then try Zone Alarm from Zone Labs. To answer your question - no noticeable slowdown. Anyone reading this should try LinkLogger, just to see the hacking/Trojan attempts that go on these days.

IT BURRRRNSSSS

Q Just a quick question. I have an AMD XP 2.1 Thoroughbred-B core processor which I've clocked to 2.7. I am running an after market CPU fan and while the PC is idle, the processor is sitting on a temperature of 45 degrees. When I run a program it goes up to about 50 degrees. Is this temperature about normal or too high?

Ben

A Nothing to fret over here. If I don't get to 55 degrees in a game, I'm not trying.



HL2 CARD

Q I know I definitely need a new graphics card to play Half-Life 2. I have a VIA KT133A chipset based K7T Turbo Limited Edition MSI Mainboard (for AMD Athlon/Duron Processor), but it only supports AGP 4X/2X. Does that mean that I cannot upgrade to a Radeon 9700/9800 card? If not, what is the next best alternative?

Peter

A You can upgrade to an ATI 9600/9700/9800 but only if it's backwards compatible with your motherboard in terms of adaptor voltage, (the PCB Revision is the key). It will also depend on MSI's implementation and I'm not familiar with what they have done with this board since early 2001 nor am I familiar with all the variations of Radeon 9xxx adaptors. The K7T AGP slot is a universal slot, which means it's not keyed specifically for AGP 2X or AGP 4X cards, so you can install almost any current AGP card in the slot, but there will almost definitely be no support for AGP 8x. From memory there is no Thoroughbred support on the K7T either. I'm pretty taken by nForce2 boards for price and the GA-7N400 Pro seems to be trouble free. It will take DDR400 memory and the big, fast Bartons as well. But, as always, you should discuss options with a reputable retailer.

STU'S TIP!



Call of Duty players with an ATI video adaptor have experienced some problems. Some users reported that after the game is launched, the system may hang or produce a VPU recover error. The IW forums claimed an ATI issue, in that the game won't work with the two most recent Catalyst driver releases (3.8 and 3.9). Initially ATI stated that it's not their problem and provided no support other than "roll back to 3.7". This, however, doesn't solve everyone's problem. I really hate it when developers give this kind of answer. If the rest of the free world can figure out how to make their game work with 3.9 and 3.8, they should have to as well. There's now a hot fix for this problem on ATI's website under INFO-BASE# 4291



Yep, HL2 will be a bitch on your system when it arrives - if it ever does



The Hub

BLIZZARD BONUS

Blizzard has just released a new bonus map for *WarCraft III: The Frozen Throne*. Designed for either 4v4 players, 6v6 or free for all (apparently 5 versus 5 is not an option), it's a large map using the Sunken Ruins tileset. Visit www.blizzard.com to make the free 307K download.

NOT A PATCH

Unreal II The Awakening is getting a special edition version of the game, and it should be available soon after you read this. Among other things, it'll feature what's called 'Unreal II XMP', or Expanded Multiplayer. Basically a large-map, team and vehicle-based multiplayer mode, it should bring *Unreal II* on par with more recent multiplayer offerings in the FPS. It'll also be a free download for existing owners of *Unreal II*.

Thar be Pirates! Setting sail on the Burning Sea

It's a common joke in the magazine that cel-shading is the new lens flare. Now it looks like we can add another joke to the repertoire, that *Pirates* are the new genetically modified super soldiers. *Pirates* are quickly becoming the flavour of the month with the recent release of games such as *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Patrician III*, *Tortuga* and the like. New developers Flying Lab Software are looking to join this lucrative genre with their MMORPG, *Pirates of the Burning Sea*, due for release in early 2004. Unlike most of the other MMO games being released in the next year, *Pirates* takes a steadfastly real world approach to the subject matter with detailed and historically relevant political and financial systems for the 18th century

Caribbean setting. Aside from the setting, *Pirates* look set to stand out from a number of competitors by entirely doing away with a leveling system in favour of a totally skills based progression system that requires a combination of book learning and practical experience for advancement. If this isn't tempting enough, *Pirates* has a few more tricks up its sleeve. How does the idea of commanding your own ship grab you? Don't worry about having to work your way up the ranks or play for a certain amount of time to unlock the option – every player is given their own ship at the beginning of the game, complete with AI crew – all you have to worry about from then on is how you use it and which



upgrades you want to purchase. Finally, as the screenshots can attest, *Pirates* looks absolutely beautiful – but the looks come at a price. Flying Lab has openly stated that the game is only intended for those with high end systems and a broadband connection. Time to upgrade me hearties.

God is dead Or at least reset



Usually when PCPP writes a news piece about *Everquest* it's usually to condemn the structure of the game or make fun of some of the players. Not this time. A group of enterprising players have proved that they, much like the virtual world they frequently inhabit, are nothing if not persistent when teamed up to do the impossible – killing Kerafym, the Sleeper, a supposedly immortal being. We say supposedly because rather than being truly unkillable Sony gave the creature one billion hit points, probably rationalising that nobody in their right

minds would spend the time required to actually kill it. They failed to realise that nobody in their right mind would dedicate their lives to *Everquest* in the first place. Be that as it may, a consortium of three clans numbering some 170 players managed to take the god down to 27% of its health before a mod decided to reset the area on the rationale that the encounter may have been "bugged". Special kudos goes to SOE for later apologising to the players involved for the incident and rewarding them with experience for the encounter.

Idiot of the Month: Online Threats

If anyone reading this is considering on going on a rampage and killing teachers and fellow students at their school, they should take a leaf from Freddy Fan's book. This American 12 year old posted on a public forum that he was going to kill teachers and students in his school the following day, stating, "I'm going to kill my teacher tomorrow and a lot of other people in my school. I'll probably kill a lot of people." When challenged on his claims in some of the

responses, Fan replied, writing "Guys I am not kidding around. I am serious. If they blame it on the horror movies I'll tell them that horror had nothing to do with this. I won't be in deep shit because I'll be killing everybody who stands in my way. If I get killed then I'll be happy with that." Unsurprisingly the police took note, found the identity of the boy from his ISP and now have him in custody after finding a hunting knife in his school bag.



Gandalf, meet Elminster

Or, how Tolkien learned to love Gygax



Not content to sit on its laurels developing one of the most anticipated upcoming MMORPGs, Middle Earth Online, developer Turbine is also casting its lot in with another incredibly popular fantasy setting with their upcoming Dungeons & Dragons MMO. Wizards of the Coast (WotC), the current owners of the Dungeons & Dragons

franchise will be working hand in hand with Turbine on the development of the game and are currently putting together a whole new world in which to play. Dubbed Eberron, this new world will be a highly magical realm with an emphasis on pulp style adventuring as seen in the Conan novels and other examples of 40s/50s style high fantasy. In an interesting

move, Turbine has proudly announced that it will be going against the common lore of MMOs and actually restricting the size of the servers. Instead of boasting that the servers will be able to handle many thousands of players at any one time, the developer has realised that one of the things that makes tabletop roleplaying so appealing is the idea of a close knit group of adventurers – a party who will stick by each other through thick and thin – and will limit the size of the servers accordingly, making it easier for groups of friends to meet up online. One of the major advantages Turbine will have over all of the competition with the game is the simple fact that there will be very few, if any gamers interested in the title who will not be familiar with the D&D D20 rules, allowing the punters to get into the action much faster without the necessity of a lengthy learning process. No release date has even tentatively been set as yet but rest assured that we'll bring you more news when it appears.

PLANETSIDESIDE FREE

PlanetSide, the firstperson action massively multiplayer online game is currently offering a free download of the client and one month's play for trial. The only catch here is that a credit card is required to snag that free month. Visit planetside.station.sony.com for more details.

CHAOS BLEEDS

Wolfpack Studios' massively multiplayer RPG Shadowbane is getting an expansion pack, titled "The Rise of Chaos". It'll include a new playable race, higher level content, as well as a bunch of graphical and interface/gameplay tweaks.

DEJA VU

Keeping on Battlefield 1942, it's influence is continuing to shine with word that a Battlefield style game set in the Star Wars news is currently in development. Tentatively called Star Wars: Battlefront, it's due for PC, PS2 and XBOX later this year.

One Must Go Gold

Let the Battlegrounds begin

The long awaited sequel to One Must Fall 2097, One Must Fall: Battlegrounds has finally gone gold after what seems like years of waiting. Although nominally a Streetfighter style fighting game, OMF: Battlegrounds seeks to expand the genre by allowing players to simultaneously battle it out against up to 15 opponents in any given arena. To try to boost initial sales the developer has announced a little bonus to everyone who preorders online but has as yet neglected to say exactly what that bonus will be. At any rate the concept of a third-person arcade style multiplayer fighting game sounds as appealing as it does novel (and we mean that in a good way). With any luck we should be able to bring you a full review of the game next month.



Star Wars: Battlefront

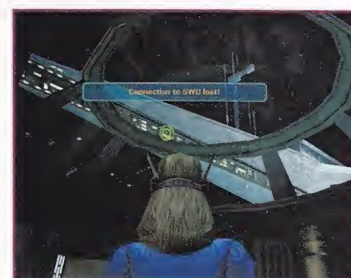
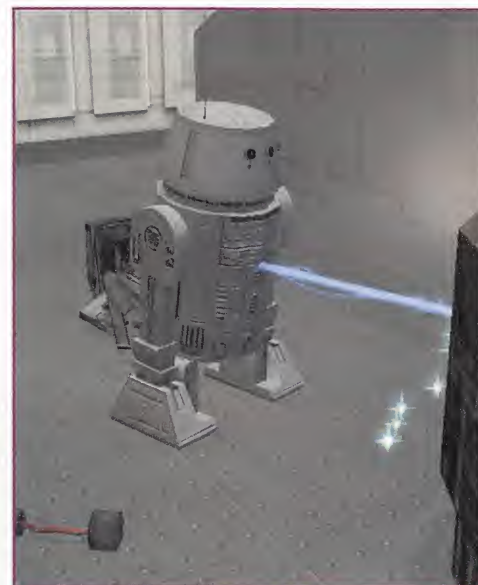
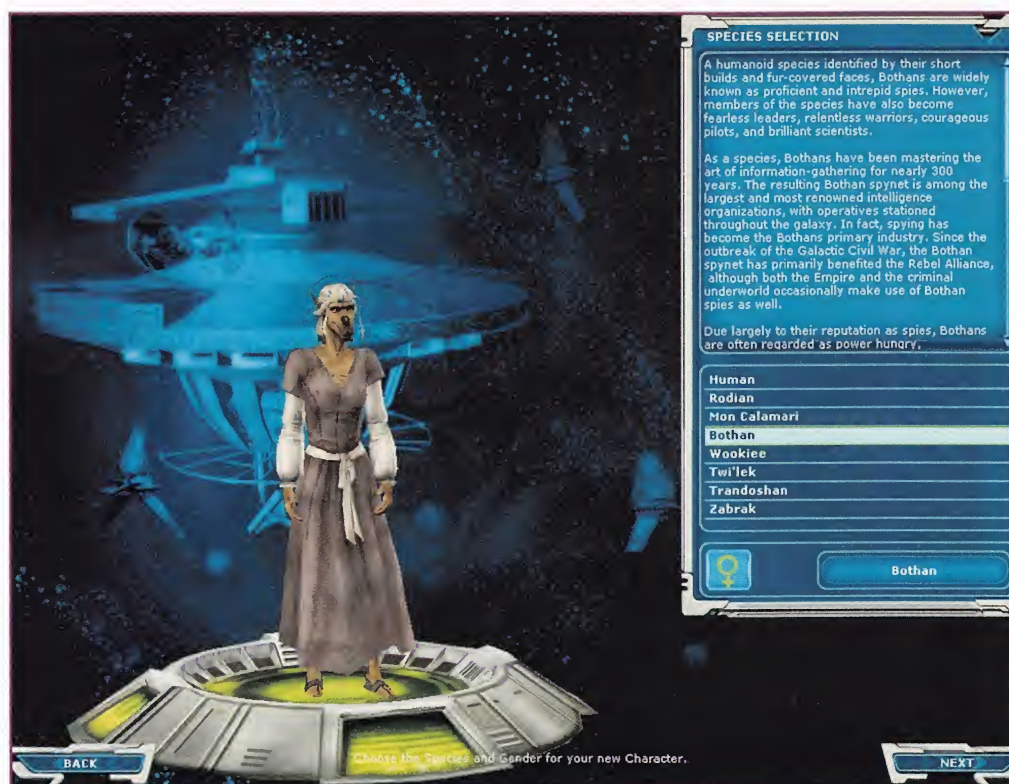
Gotta be better than Galaxies!

In a move sure to keep a number of gamers and fanboys happy, LucasArts has recently announced a Battlefield 1942 style multiplayer online shooter set in the Star Wars universe. It's too soon yet to reveal any information but LucasArts has hinted that the game will allow players to play during either the Clone Wars or the Galactic Civil War, giving them a wide range of character

classes and skins to choose from. From what we understand, players will be able to drive or pilot just about any vehicle yet seen in the films (with the exception of Star Destroyers, Death Stars and the like) – hell, you can even ride a tauntaun, although there have been no indications as yet as to if the player can cut them open and spend a cozy evening in their rancid intestines.

Star Wars Galaxies

With still no local release, PCPP checks in on SWG to see how things are goin'



PUNKS ARE DEAD

DICE and EA are making good on the promise to make *Battlefield 1942* as cheat and exploit-free as possible. Choosing Even Balance's 'Punkbuster' anti-cheat program, DICE will implement the measures in response to the overwhelming request from the *Battlefield* community itself.

Star Wars Galaxies went live in the US in July of 2003, and with all the hoopla and hype preceding the launch even we were surprised at what was deemed fit enough to make it onto store shelves. Given the experience behind the developers (including staffers from pretty much all the major preceding massively multiplayer RPGs, including ex-employees from UO and EverQuest), the weight of George Lucas' license and the backing of Sony Online Entertainment (responsible for managing the huge membership belonging to EverQuest), you'd expect a game on launch day to - at the very least - well, work. But the rush of new subscribers overloaded the login servers resulting in the majority of players not being able to create an account nor begin their Star Wars flavoured shenanigans online. SOE fixed the problem quick enough (the following day proved much more successful) and were even kind enough to credit all day-one subscribers an extra day to compensate. So with that problem out of the way, wouldn't you expect to be able to logon on day two of proceedings and encounter a game that, well, works?

Absolutely. But this is an MMORPG, and hardly any of these things ship in a

complete state these days. And as with all MMORPGs that actually see release, the feature list of the early days of development is usually larger and more ambitious than the one that accompanies the final product. Given the complexity of the genre, it has now become common practice to cull certain features and give these to subscribers as free updates after the game goes live - and over the course of the title's lifetime - to hit the market and start earning some money. And rightly so, these are hugely expensive endeavours. However in SWG's case, SOE and LucasArts were pushing what could be deemed "acceptable" to the limit. The fact that a particular few features didn't make initial release - namely player vehicles and mounts - made one thing all the more obvious: that this game was, in no uncertain terms, broken.

The big sore thumb was the mission system. The NPC mission givers would simply not recognize that the errand you just ran for them was in fact completed. And considering that most missions had you running out into the wilderness for up to 10 minutes in realtime (don't forget the journey back!), this particular bug was certainly a spectacular showstopper for many. But still, even with this, the

numerous crashes and the mammoth number of balance issues scaling all of the game's many systems (player professions, combat, skill advancement and the economy to name a few), players saw the potential and persevered to make SWG the fast growing MMORPG out there. It's now second only to the very well established EverQuest.

Fast forward six months and SWG is a much smoother experience. The mission system has been fixed, and player mounts (Star Wars beasts that players can ride) were released before the end of last year, speeding up travel times for those that could afford them. At the time of writing, the release of the even faster landspeeder, the swoop and the speeder bike as a free update was just weeks away. Another update to occur before the end of 2003 was the release of the player city update, allowing players to set up their own "community managed outposts" in predetermined 'zones' in normally desolate areas of the SWG universe.

The other big development towards the end of the year was the discovery that a small number of players unlocked their "force sensitive slots", effectively making them the first Jedi in the game. A major drawcard of the SWG experience, developers were



correct in anticipating that it would take the better part of six months to uncover this ability, and that it would whip players into a massive frenzy. Indeed, the presence of Jedi in the game has changed SWG for the better. For the roleplayers out there, the game now has a decidedly more Star Wars feel about it with players scrambling to become involved, whether it be to learn how to become one, to hunt one down (massive bounties are placed on the Jedi, in keeping with Star Wars lore), or even simply to catch a glimpse of one.

But there are still many issues that need addressing, of which the developers are well aware. Now that the more pressing stability issues have been tended to, the team is looking towards the underlying systems of the game. The life-less turn-based combat system is getting a major overhaul in the coming months, as is creature balance and profession specialisation.

In this respect, SWG is not alone; MMORPGs are dynamic and complex affairs that constantly need "fixing" and tinkering with. And while the SWG team is keeping busy with the nuts and bolts of things, players are becoming more vocal as to what they hunger for, and what this title lacks the most - live events. At the end of the day, apart from the sights and sounds, SWG is suffering from a bit of an identity crisis. The big theme park that is SWG has only got a few fun rides at the moment. How far the live event system is up the list of priorities, we're not sure - we'll check back again later in the year when Star Wars Galaxies gets an official release to see how things are progressing.

March Stepnik

War Of The Ring

Developer: Liquid Entertainment ■ Publisher: Vivendi



Looking at War of The Ring with an eye for multiplayer shenanigans, the first thing that strikes you is how similar the basic blueprint is to Warcraft III's online game. Many of the elements - the heroes, the buildings and the units - seem very similar to the hordes in Blizzard's ever popular effort.

Both game designs also encourage aggressive rushing and exploration of the map for unique resources and strongholds where you can gain an advantage for occupying an area or commandeering a structure. You will certainly find both games feel similar in this regard, but it is unfair to call War of The Ring a simple rip-off clone and walk away with disgust.

Those who take this stand ignore the fact that War of The Ring was developed by Liquid Entertainment and Liquid also developed Battle Realms, an underrated game which seemingly influenced Warcraft III's development a lot. So now the circle is complete.

There are a few decent differences between the two games anyway. For a start War of The Ring has some unique game modes which give the multiplayer aspects of the game a different feel. There is one mode which sees you battling other players for control of a massive catapult. Another mode, called famine sees you battling for very meagre resources and having to conserve your forces as they are

effectively much more expensive to create in the first place. War of The Ring also has a hero and fate powers system which helps differentiate it from Warcraft III. The system is reminiscent of the yin/yang approach in Battle Realms where you were awarded power points for destroying enemies in battle. These can then be spent on cataclysmic fate powers, hugely effective attacks which are more akin to the God powers in Age of Mythology.

War of The Ring does suffer a little as an online game as the interface isn't quite as well geared to the fast paced play you need to immerse yourself in when belting others while online. Some of the icons you need to use (particularly the fate powers) just aren't as accessible as they should be. Also the fact that the game lacks a formation system means that you do have to micromanage your troops a lot more than you'd probably prefer.

However the game does offer hero based online gaming which is different enough to Warcraft III to interest you if you'd like a change of pace. There is some unit balancing which could have been better managed and certainly some units are just crap in most fights, but for the most part this isn't too bad. So if you want to get yourself involved in an online struggle of Tolkienesque proportions then this game is a good yet not outstanding effort.

Steve Polak

RATING



FOR

The catapult mode is pretty funny and some of the fate powers will impress

AGAINST

The game does struggle to distinguish itself from its competitors and the interface isn't quite as smooth as it could be.

OVERALL

Worth exploring if you are a hard core hobbit head or are sick of Warcraft III.

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SHATTERING

And another free download. Shattered Galaxy - the massively multiplayer realtime strategy game is offering a free client download and is now offering free play time, replacing the 14 day/50 hour limit previously in effect. Download at www.sgalaxy.com.

MUTANT

MMO Mini-Profile #1: An new RPG coming from "community man done good" Dave Rickey and Mutable Realms. Drawcard: new server architecture allowing tens of thousands of players to interact on the one server. Visit www.mutablerealms.com.

ECOLOGICAL

MMO Mini-Profile #2: Horizons: Empire of Istara, an RPG by Artifact Entertainment. Drawcard: Massive gaming world, new community-focused activities and a highly detailed ecology. Head over to www.istaria.com for more.

Havish

For: Morrowind ■ Version: N/A ■ URL: www.rpgplanet.com/morrowind/modcontrols/mods.asp ■ Score: 3/5

If you've seen everything there is to see exploring the world of Vvardenfell then Havish is the plugin you've been waiting for. The plugin adds a new city state to the west of the main landmass and everything that entails: 11 new guild missions, over 100 new buildings to loot and a 24 square landmass to explore. If you play a thief character then Havish is almost an absolute necessity as the mod contains 20 thieves guild missions totally independent from any other Vvardenfell guild mission. With any luck there will be later versions of the mod as although the city itself and the guild missions are well developed the rest of the area is a little on the dull side. Luckily the mod is compatible with virtually all of the currently available plugins so with a little downloading you should be able to populate the world with enough adventure to keep you satiated until the next expansion.



Shadows over Soubar

For: Baldur's Gate 2: Throne of Baal ■ Version: 1.0.0 ■ URL: www.teambg.net/soubar/ ■ Score: 4/5



God bless those crazies over at TeamBG for continuously breathing life into old Infinity Engine games and keeping roleplayers in games. Their latest foray into the world of fantasy is Shadows over Soubar, an epic conversion that contains, among other things, two major quests and 30 subquests, 400 new creatures, over 400 new items and a group of new NPC characters each with their own unique personalities and interactions. To access the new missions and material in Soubar, players must complete all of the Trademeet missions. Once this criterion has been filled the player is approached by a group of mysterious men with a request for help. What follows is a fantastic example of a fan of both the game and genre going to town and creating a mod that is at once a loving tribute to the original as well as being a great RPG in its own right. It may be a big download but it's definitely recommended.

Mechanical Payne

For: Max Payne ■ Version: Test ■ URL: www.fileplanet.com/files/130000/131087.shtml ■ Score: 2/5

Mechanical Payne is more of a compilation of other Max Payne mods than a mod in and of itself, as it contains elements of Kung Fu, Assassinz (which itself is a compilation mod), Matrixed Reality as well as various little tweaks to blood, animations, weapon skins and the like. The combination works well and is quite a fun little addition to Max Payne but it's definitely far from perfect. One of the features touted in the test release was a new skin for Max that turns him into a cyborg. Whilst this isn't a particularly big thing the fact that the skin appears to be either corrupted or buggy causing the skin to either not work at all or worse, work for a short while and then cause the game to crash. The next release of the mod should fix up these problems so hopefully by the time you're reading this you'll be able to download fixed version.



Troopers Dawn of Destiny

For: UT 2003 ■ Version: v210 ■ URL: www.ut2003troopers.com ■ Score: 4/5



LucasArts should seriously consider hiring these guys to make the next Star Wars shooter instead of farming it out to Raven for yet another half-arsed job. Star Wars FPS has never looked as good as it does in Troopers thanks to the UT 2003 engine and some real dedication from the modelers. This multiplayer only mod sees teams of Rebels and Imperials duking it out in a number of immediately recognisable Star Wars locales including the iconic Death Star, Mos Eisley Cantina, the ice planet of Hoth, forest moon Endor and even the bridge of an Imperial Star Destroyer Mk II. Although the lack of Jedi may disappoint some players the modeling and implementation of the weapons is top notch, making the whole mod ooze with Star Wars goodness. More maps are currently being made for the next iteration of the mod and will include a map based around the Carbonite Freezing Chamber.

Ultimate Vice City

For: TA: Vice City ■ Version: 2.0 ■ URL: www.fileplanet.com/files/130000/132353.shtml ■ Score: 4/5

Have you gotten to that point in Vice City where you have completed every mission, found every hidden package and otherwise 100% the entire game but are reticent to uninstall it because you keep telling yourself you'll go back to it? Don't worry, you're not alone but you need fear no longer the idea of growing bored with Vice City. Ultimate Vice City 2.0 adds 40 new cars to the game as well as new billboards and a few recognizable landmarks including the twin towers of the World Trade Centre. The mod also adds a bike park to the map so all of you crazy trick-hounds should be able to while away your time perfecting your spins and flips. Whilst the mod doesn't add any new missions to the game the simple act of finding all of the cars and taking them for a test drive will take up quite a good deal of time.



ELEMENTARY

A new mod for Dungeon Siege is now available, titled Elemental. In the developers own words: "Elemental is set in an alternate mythical version of ancient Judea that is gritty, mean, and profane. In a world full of Romans, thieves, and monsters the only real way to describe the Elemental experience is with one word, Biblepunk." Go to www.the-elemental.net for the download.

Frostbite

For: Ghost Recon ■ Version: v1.2 ■ URL: eloso.3dretreat.com/Eloso/Frostbite/Frostbite.htm ■ Score: 5/5



Before you rush out and download this mod, make sure you have the Island Thunder and Desert Siege expansion packs installed as well as they are required to get the mod to run but chances are that if you're interested in a Ghost Recon mod you already own both expansions. This is a mod guaranteed to breathe some life back into the title due to the fact that it contains a story driven, eight mission single player campaign, new characters, vehicles and missions as well as new maps, all of which are available to play in multiplayer. If the number of downloads is anything to go by, Frostbite v1.2 looks as though it will be one of those mods that will make the developers stand up and take notice although it was only released a few months ago in May, Frostbite has been downloaded a staggering 42000 times.

HEROIC

MMO Mini-Profile #3: City of Heroes, a Superhero RPG coming from Cryptic Studios. Drawcard: Ability to create a superhero with all manner of marvellous abilities, lack of experience levels - City of Heroes charts development by the innovative 'Fame' meter. www.cityofheroes.com.

JKIJASDK

Raven Software has just release the Jedi Academy Software Development Kit for aspiring designers. Including the multiplayer source code from the Star Wars, and as usual are unsupported by Raven. The 6.5MB file can be downloaded from www.lucasarts.com.

GARAGE GAMES

Into the unknown with George Soropos

I OF THE ENEMY

Developer: **Enemy Technology** Genre: **RTS** URL: www.enemytechnology.com/



We're blasting off into space again this month but instead of adventuring through the void we'll be waging interplanetary war with heavily armed 2D sprites. The RTS genre is one of the rarer species on the indie scene, probably due to the complexity involved in its style. It wasn't easy but the new workers, um students in our 'english language classes' housed in the dungeon, er... basement were eventually able to track down I of the Enemy before they collapsed from heat exhaustion.

I of the Enemy is a reasonably straightforward RTS which focuses on tactics rather than resource gathering. The total number of units in your army is limited to



avoid rushing tactics, instead making you think about setting up favourable unit match-ups to give your side an advantage. A level designer is included in the full version of the game, along with online play and even a few cut-scenes. The demo contains the first five levels of the game and is available from the URL above!



ONE-ON-ONE WITH MARK TEMPLE

We flung some questions about the game and the indie scene in general at the lead developer, Mark Temple, in our continuing effort to gather information on these subversives so that they can be caught, tagged and released by Microsoft researchers at a later date.

PC Powerplay: First off the usual 'tell us your life story' question, or rather tell us a bit about Enemy Technology.

Mark Temple: It started with me and my brother (William) at an Art Mart in Escondido, CA with us lacquering some business cards in the parking lot to hand out at a Las Vegas PC show. Work on IOE started as a PC-DOS project shortly after. I have done most of the game code while my brother concentrated on the low-level code. Aaron Marks (author of "The complete guide to Game Audio") has been our sound guy almost from the beginning. The art team has varied from none to four at its peak. It was all on nights and weekends after getting home from our "real" jobs. I am an Air Traffic Control Officer in the USMC but I

have only been back doing that since being recalled from the reserves shortly after September 11th, 2001. I have once again left active duty on October 8th of this year, and I am now working on the final stages of IOE.

PCPP: This is the first indie game we've covered that uses professional voice acting, was that an expensive option? Or is Ian McNeice (Dune and Children of Dune TV specials) your third cousin's brother-in-law?

MT: You've hit it exactly right! Ian is a close family friend so I was able to convince him to help me out. When I was a producer with Quadra Interactive doing the Windows port of the Journeyman Project I gained a bit of experience organising voice recording sessions. It isn't really too expensive, even for an indie budget. So I was able to find a pretty good supporting cast to work with Ian, and I am glad I expended the effort.

PCPP: Has the emergence of the next generation consoles made things better or worse for indie developers as the focus of the industry has shifted?

MT: I don't see how development of a console game is even a serious option for independent developers.

The start-up costs are so bad that you have immediately raised the bar for yourself in terms of how much you have to sell to be profitable. But the worst part of it is, you might create a great console game and STILL go out of business for a million different reasons, not the least of which is because you are prevented from publishing it by the folks who own the hardware. That total lack of control was just unacceptable to me. In my mind, the first tenet of any independent developer's business plan is to reduce the number of ways you can fail that are out of your control!

PCPP: What is your idea of your ultimate game, your 'dream' project?

MT: The ultimate title in our business plan is an MMOG that will contain technology developed as part of four previous games, of which "I of the Enemy" is the first. We designed each title such that a key piece of technology would be developed as its core. In the end, these four pieces of a larger game engine will be put together in the design of the MMOG. Of course, we need at least moderate success with each of the precursor titles to get to the MMOG, or else it will all have been just a nice idea.



BOOTCAMP

Online Tips and Tactics

C&C GENERALS: ZERO HOUR

Nine new Generals to play with and nine new forces to master. Steve Polak offers some tips for each faction so you won't get swamped by clued up adversaries.



GLA

Toxin

PCPP Battle Rating 7/10

It is, according to some a dastardly tactic, but you can absolutely dominate an area very quickly by using a Jeep to race a worker at your enemy's camp and having them build a toxin tunnel within range of their troop or vehicle production buildings. The tunnel will quickly stifle all opposition with its toxin gun and the two rocket soldiers you get can start doing some serious damage to the surrounding buildings. Using toxin troops for ambushes in enemy bases can also be much more effective than regular troopers as the toxin guys can damage tanks much more effectively.

Demolition

PCPP Battle Rating 7/10

Demolition General only really has one good trick, but it is a ripper. Use your enhanced suicide troops and create a huge fleet of motorcycles with these guys riding. The amount of damage you can quickly do to an enemy base is devastating, even if there is a lot of micromanagement involved.

Stealth

PCPP Battle Rating 8/10

A hard side to play well as the absence of tanks means that the Stealth side lacks a fair bit of punching power. However using rocket buggies and quad cannons (especially once they are powered up by scavenging) as well as lots of well hidden tunnels can keep your enemy permanently on the back foot. Cammo netting is also at the heart of your strategy here and it should be added to most buildings as it immediately renders them

invisible. Using lots of netting you can setup completely hidden new bases away from your main base. This sort of thing can make you a slippery customer. As your enemy pummels what he believes is your main base you can be building a handy new strike force at your second base that your enemy doesn't even know about. Invisible hijackers can also cause poorly defended enemy heavy tanks all sorts of grief. Pinching Overlords and Emperors bereft of defensive gattling guns with hijackers is really sneaky and effective.



US Forces

US Air

PCPP Battle Rating 9/10

The US is not too bad at the start of the game, as you can use the armoured chopper, full to the brim with Missile Defenders, to knock out the enemy's economy quickly and easily. However the US air force's real power arrives once you have managed to get a good base set up and are supported by the awesome striking power of a fleet of Aurora bombers. Simply tagging individual bombers to hot keys and selecting targets one by one and cycling through your planes as they return to rearm can keep an enemy so off balance they don't even get the opportunity to mount a land offensive at all. In case they do make sure you have a good mix of artillery and Tomahawks ready to ward off the few tanks that do get through your airpower led assault.

US Laser

PCPP Battle Rating 6/10

This force looks quite weak on paper and certainly you must make sure you have power at all times, as your

laser tanks are useless if your base is powered down. Laser general has the ability to strike hard and keep enemy tanks and infantry on the run if you use a good combined assault force. Use lots of laser tanks, as well as a few snipers and Avengers and you'll have a formidable crew on your hands. The laser defence turrets are also brilliant against enemy air and ground forces.

US Super Weapons

PCPP Battle Rating 3/10

To be honest this side is hard to justify using as there are few bonuses and many weaknesses. You do get cheaper power and particle cannon, but you don't have tanks and this absence is clearly a weakness when you don't have the firepower to make up for it in any other areas. The Super Weapon side also has the at times useful EMP defences, but it can be a bit hit and miss and can even sometimes paralyse your own buildings as well as attacking enemy units. To be honest this force is hard to recommend, US Laser and US Air are just so much better.



China

China Nuke

PCPP Battle Rating 10/10

China's Nuke side gives you the ability to strike fast and hard. The basic tank moves quicker than most other similar tanks and is almost equally good at killing infantry as well as armour because of its nuclear fallout. This makes the basic nuke tank a very good early strike weapon. Later you cannot go past the combination of Overlords and Nuke Cannon once you have upgraded your cannon so that they kill troops and leave enemy tanks

ready for capture. Using this combination can really cause trouble for China's tank general who lacks the artillery to get in range

China Infantry

PCPP Battle Rating 8/10

The Attack Outpost is the key to any victory when using infantry. You should always build these in numbers and use their stealth ability to get behind the enemy lines and cause havoc on the rear. Also even though they come with a few rocket troopers it is really worth making sure they are full to the brim with soldiers, ensuring that a few of the guys you toss in are gattling gunners (to take car or enemy infantry). Using your vans and keeping your distance or even running away from large forces of enemy tanks can be devastating. You can nip away at the heels of an enemy formation, retreating and returning and if you manage to sucker enemies into following you can cut their armour to pieces. Beware of aircraft though as the vans are vulnerable to attack from the skies (especially from the American who can nullify your rocket troopers with their ECM).

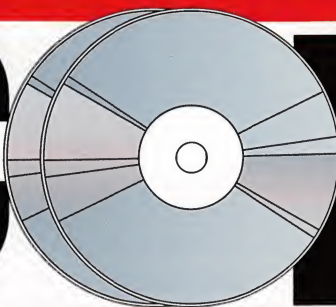
China Tank

PCPP Battle Rating 5/10

Unless you can get a good number of the devastating Emperor tanks up and running fast this seemingly fast side is going to have problems. Your tanks are actually very vulnerable. They can be bombed from the air, sniped so that they are vulnerable to capture and torn apart by rocket troopers for little cost. The Nuke General Nuke Cannon (once it has Neutron Shells) also stop a force of Emperors without a shot being fired. You must tank rush and fast to avoid all of this.



THE DISC



REQUESTS

We welcome requests so please forward your requests to Disc Producer Amos Hong via email at cdgod@next.com.au or write to PCPP DVD Requests, 78 Renwick St, Redfern NSW 2016



Hello readers. Welcome to another exciting edition of the PC Powerplay disc. This month the talk has been about the highly anticipated release of the Deus Ex: Invisible War demo. Check out the Spotlight section for the exciting new demo.

Aside from the Deus Ex 2 demo, the Spotlight has America's Army 2. This FREE game allows the user to play as a member of the Special Forces unit. You even get to carry special weapons reserved for the unit. Also this month sees the return of the machinima movie Anachronox, only two more episodes to go till the end of the series. As a special surprise who have included two award winning machinima movies, LuckyMan and Hardly Workin'. Spotlight also has the winner of the PC Powerplay wallpaper competition.

The Demos section has heaps of demos to keep you occupied till the next issue. We have some great demos like Beyond Good & Evil, Secret Weapons over Normandy and The Temple of Elemental Evil. For fans of Australian Idol, you can keep the excitement going with the demo of Pop Idol.

The Mods Plus and Patches areas include several items that will improve your games for the better. The Bunker has gone slightly down in size, but it still has all the best wallpapers, maps and themes going around. Another section that has been streamlined is the Utilities.

Brick not hit back

Amos Hong - Disc Master
cdgod@next.com.au

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PCPP WALLPAPER COMPETITION WINNER
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Worms 3D

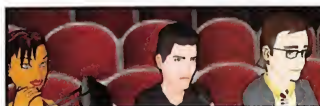


MODS PLUS
Mechanical Payne [Max Payne]
Frostbite v1.2 [Ghost Recon]
Havish [ESIII: Morrowind]
Shadows of Soubar [BGII: ToB]
Ultimate Vice City 2.0 [GTA:VC]

PLUS MODLIFE
Troopers: DoD v210 [UT2003]

PATCHES
Beyond Good & Evil v1.01
Commandos 3 v1.42
Pro Evolution Soccer 3 v1.10.2
Robin Hood: Defender of the Crown v1.02
Star Wars: Knights of the Old

Republic v1.01
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UTILITIES
Adobe Acrobat Reader 6.0 - f
Advanced Zip Repair 1.6 - s
AutoDivX Player 3.6 - f
DivX Player (with DivX Codec) 5.1.1 - f
DirectX 9.0b - f
GameSpy Arcade v1.4 - f
nVIDIA ForceWare drivers 52.16 - f
Windows Media Player 9 - f
WinRAR 3.2 - s
Winzip 8.1 - s
Zip Repair 1.0 - f



CD CONTENTS

CD 1
FREE GAME
America's Army 2.0

CD 2
DEMOS
FireStarter
The Chickenator
Secret Weapons Over Normandy
The Temple of Elemental Evil
Railroad Tycoon 3
Weird Helmet



FREE GAMES
Happyland Adventures
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Mailbag From Hell 2

It's the sequel that just sort of happened



For you few Boots aficionados who have been following the adventures of my good self and my unlikely footwear since we first graced the pages of this magazine back in 2001, you will no doubt recall my aborted attempt to start a sort of advice column or helpful letters type page, even going to the extent of providing one of my own email addresses to do so.

You will also no doubt recall that less than two months later I called the whole thing off, partly on the advice of the Boots who felt I was giving the unwashed hordes too much attention, and partly because I'm not very good at giving advice. And yet, ever since I published that email address I have been receiving a slow but steady trickle of mopes, whines and whinges from folks as far flung as the US - which is odd because this magazine isn't sold in the US. For a while I used to reply to whoever wrote to me explaining that the advice column had closed down even before it really got started, but eventually I gave and just let the letters accumulate. Perhaps now is a good time to publish a few of them, with replies, in the hopes that once you see how crap I am at this you'll stop bothering me.

Dear Boots,

I am 15 years old and no girls like me. I like to go to pubs on a fake ID and get photos of myself with those women who hand around new kinds of alcohol, you know, as testers. Then I paste them all in my photobook and carry the photobook everywhere with me, in my pants. How can I get girls to like me?

Frustr8ed

Where did you get your fake ID done? Perhaps you could take some girls there and help them get fake IDs of their own. I also find pushing drugs can get you a lot of contacts. After all, it's not what you know, it's who you know. Also, judging from your photo which you kindly included, you should try wearing a shirt more because man-boobs aren't in at the moment (but they are making a comeback). I'd also get that lump looked at.

Dear Boots,

My recent studies into four-fold Planck space have yielded anomalous results that seem to indicate that the currently understood 'spin' of most quarks is fundamentally wrong. However, my findings are in conflict with my other studies into super-string theory which indicates that dark matter may make up more than 40% MORE of the universe than we at first suspected. Also, Dr Phillicut calls me four-eyes even though his glasses are much thicker than mine.

QntmFreek

Listen QntmFreek, if that really is your name, if you don't stand up to Phillicut our entire understanding of advanced quantum physics could be set back by decades. You need to ambush that outdated ostrich, punch him in the

face, and while he's reeling about in excruciating pain, steal his results on boson resonance and build them into your own superpositioning model. Also, you could try getting stoned once in a while. It worked for Einstein.

Dear Boots,

In shareware Doom is it even possible to finish the game? At the end of the last level I fight the two Barons and then I get teleported into this dark room full of like heaps of monsters and I always die. Even if I IDDQD, I'm just stuck in that last room with monsters biting me. How do I win?

DoomGod

Oh. My. GOD. Have you been struggling with this for TEN FREAKING YEARS? I tell you what, go out and buy yourself a copy of Mission Humanity, take the CD out of the box, crumple up the box, and then jam the box down your throat so you choke to death on your own stupidity (as represented by the box).

Dear Boots,

Reading that last letter about the Doom guy brought my own personal pain back into sharp relief. I am a world class 3D programmer who develops consistently ground breaking 3D engines that wow the gaming world time and time again. However, my real passion is for writing game scenarios, but no one takes my work seriously. They say my concepts are simplistic, adolescent, and that I have an obsession with demons, satanic imagery and Martian colonies. How can I get my legions of fans to love me for my great ideas, not just for my 3D engines?

JC

Okay, leaving aside the question of how it is you knew the previous letter was about Doom even before I decided to include it in this column we turn to the core of the matter. And my advice is this - give up. Just admit, now that you're stinkingly rich and about to shoot yourself into outer space as part of a harebrained civilian rocketry project, that your company develops ENGINES, not games. It's a middleware developer that includes a decent example game with each release. Also, I think you should do more celebrity quiz shows like Celebrity Who Wants to Be a Millionaire so we can all laugh when you don't now how many Dalai Lamas there have been. Or something about Elizabeth Taylor.

Dear Yellow,

Where are the Snowdens of yesteryear?

Hellerfan

First up, Hellerfan, I prefer to be addressed as Boots. Or at least, the Boots prefer to be addresses as Boots, if I told you my name there would be a big scandal in the popular press. How big? Big. Let's just say my father's in politics. Or, better yet, let's say he ISN'T in politics. As to your question - are you trying to be clever? Get stuffed.

Dear Boots,

Writing a humour page at the back of a popular magazine is hard isn't it? You keep at it mate, don't let anyone get you down. Follow your dreamzors!

DirtyCritic

Uh yeah, that's probably all we've got time for.



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